
Terrorism and World Crisis: September 11, 2001 and Islam*

Zayn Kassam
Pomona College

Ten centuries ago, the celebrated Persian poet Nasir Khusraw lamented the Islam he saw around him as one characterized by literalism and legalism, even as he made a case for enlightening the understanding of one's faith through investigation, analysis and informed praxis. As we reflect on the terrible tragedy of 9/11, those of us who are Muslims, and those of us who study Islam in the Academy may be struck by the double bind in which we find ourselves. On the one hand, engaging the question, "Why would they hate us so much so as to instigate such a senseless, tragic act?" raises doubts about our patriotic spirit at the same time as it illuminates the consequences of our, and might I add, European foreign policy during the last 150 years. On the other hand, even as we rise to defend Islam and Muslims against mandating and undertaking such a heinous assault on innocent human lives through a hermeneutic that distances the perpetrators from Ordinary Muslims and affirms the close affinity Islam has with Judaism and Christianity, we are forced to admit that yes, the pilots and their accomplices were card-carrying Muslims, yes, they looked to their own understanding of Islam to fortify their spirits prior to their acts, and yes, a legalistic and literalistic interpretation of Islam has come to the forefront of public discourse in recent decades and evi-

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dence of this is to be found globally wherever there are conflicts involving Muslims. What's more, this is real, true, Islam, according to the media and foreign policy analysts, supported by the Muslims involved themselves, entailing the infamous Huntingtonian phrase "clash of civilizations" in which these Muslims hate the West, hate democracy, hate women, hate minorities, and express this hate through repression, terror and militancy.

Speaking both as a Muslim and as an academic, I am struck by the paradox of our information-overwhelmed age, which is how little we all seem to know about each other. The vast and deep-rooted Orientalism of many of the responses and reactions to the tragedy are matched by an equally vast and profound Occidentalism generated, it seems, in madrasas or religious schools along the Pakistani-Afghani border and elsewhere in the world. On our soil perhaps the only good thing to have come out from the tragedy is an eagerness and compulsion to find out more about our neighbours and to invite them to our worship services or attend theirs, to find common ground, to come together in rallies for peace, to identify sacred texts upholding human dignity, promoting peace and pluralism, and pointing to the value of social justice and freedom for all. Yet one might wonder whether all the focus on Islam, which I welcome, since Muslims almost equal the number of Jews in North America, and both traditions must be understood more profoundly, is what this is all about. Is it not a red herring? After all, can one study Islam without understanding the material conditions under which Muslims live? And what is our role in contributing and perpetuating those material conditions? Why do physicians and novelists such as the Egyptian Nawal el-Saadawi link the older Bush's foreign policy to the oppression of women in Egypt? Is this simply an expression of more anti-Western sentiment or is there a real connection between our foreign policies and our financial and military support of some of the most undemocratic governments in the world and the rise in popular support of Islamist ideologies?

And if we were to admit that there might be a link between what we do here and the material conditions under which many Muslims live, then we might be led to ask how such peoples might engage in agitating for social justice. In other contexts, such as Latin America, or

Tibet, we might call those religious ideologies that involve themselves with social justice issues Liberation Theologies or Engaged Buddhism. However, we rarely speak of Muslim organizations that we style Islamist, i.e. those Muslim organizations that identify state governance as a clear goal, concomitant with the imposition of shari'ah law, we rarely call them Engaged Islam or Islamic Liberation Theologies. This, despite the fact that in many cases Islamist organizations are able to win over a famished, underemployed, under health-served population through the provision of food, aid, hospitals, clinics, and yes, madrasas.

Thus, one can see how the social justice ethos of Islam is brought into service as a tool for the propagation of ideologies that bear an Islamic imprint but that generate a kind of discourse and mode of action that is by no means the only form of Islam there is. I am struck, when I see our media portraying Islam as that Islam which is defined by the Islamists—and let me here momentarily digress to show you how deeply rooted our monolithic understanding of Islam as what you find in Saudi Arabia or as defined by Islamist organizations is—when a liberal church in Claremont wanted to learn more about Islam before the tragedy occurred, they telephoned me and asked me to recommend someone to speak to them, and when I offered my services, they said, well, you're not really a Muslim are you? You don't cover your head and we understand you are very liberal. They were seeking instead a patriarchal bearded male who would confirm for them that women were to be covered and operate in separate social spheres, and tell them how disciplined Muslims are because they pray five times a day, observe Ramadan, give zakat and make the pilgrimage, and do you do all those things, they asked? Can you find us an authentic Muslim? After the tragedy, other church members informed me that they had returned from a weekend retreat and decided at that retreat that Muslims don't worship the same God as they do, to which I responded, well, I'm not sure I worship the God the pilots of the plane did, either, since mine is a God of compassion, mercy, and looks down on people who take innocent lives.

In any case, the point to be made is that Islamist-defined Islam which I believe to be religion pressed into service for real social and political grievances, has created and fuels the perception in the popular

imaginary that real Islam is the obscurantist Islam promoted by such ideologues who have a clear political agenda. More depressing, in my view, is the fact that such ideologies are indoctrinated into children who, when they grow up, rarely have access to educational systems that impart critical thinking skills, or to young adults at colleges and universities who jump on the anti-Western bandwagon, perhaps justifiably, but are led to believe that the solution lies solely in the Islamist ideology presented to them, because they themselves are ignorant of the vast treasure house of their own faith and its cultural, intellectual, artistic, architectural and scientific heritage. They are quite unaware of the intertwined histories of the Muslim world and the Western world: that the brilliant Islamic achievements of the ninth to the 14th centuries were sparked by a close reading of Greek texts that form one of the founding pillars of Western civilization, and that the achievements of Muslim philosophers and scientists led in part to the European Renaissance. Nor are they aware of the pluralistic societies ruled by Muslims where Jews and Christians found refuge and contexts in which they could live and work, by and large, with a few exceptions, as they fled from the Crusaders and later from the Spaniards. Nor are they aware of the pluralism and diversity within the Islamic world itself, where communities with different understandings of what it meant to be Muslim coexisted, again, by and large, with a few exceptions, alongside each other. Nor are they aware that veiling was introduced and made applicable in the eighth and ninth centuries to all Muslim women largely in consonance with Jewish, Christian and Persian customs according to which veiling and seclusion were marks of upper-class status. There can be very little understanding of one's own heritage without economically viable societies that offer broad based education, which can only be utilized if school age children are not required to labour to augment the family's income. In other words, material conditions have to be addressed at the same time as the delivery of education and health.

So the question, then, is that if the Islamic tradition is so rich in diversity, intellectual endeavour, artistic ability, and pluralism of perspectives, then why do Islamists choose to align themselves with a perception of Islam that goes back no more than two and a half centuries?

As students of religions, we know that orthodoxies are created and perpetuated through material support and the power to punish. So, who is providing the funding, and who is providing the arms? And how are we complicit in that delivery? And how are Muslims everywhere complicit in not speaking out against Islamist discourses that narrow a profound and noble religious tradition into a tool of aggression against women, against minorities, against plural societies, that indoctrinate children, re-establish laws that are so archaic as to be laughable and no longer within the ethics or the spirit of Islam, and who turn the Compassionate One into a fuel-loaded jet? The problem is that if the educated and the wise in the Muslim world and elsewhere continue to be silenced by fear of retaliation, then there is no hope for many Muslim societies. Ironically, it is not our democracy that many Muslim societies fear; rather, they fear that democracy will never be theirs if we continue to support tyrannical governments there. Our might lies not only in our military machine but also in our upholding human rights in this country and wherever we can.