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*Terrorism and World Crisis:*  
Reflections on Teaching Islam  
Through and After September 11<sup>th</sup>:  
Between Islamic Studies and a  
Progressive Muslim Agenda

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I miss September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

On September 10<sup>th</sup>, the world was still filled with great injustice, untold beauty, and immense suffering. But it was a world that as an Islamicist, I felt equipped to handle, to comment upon, and to teach about. All of that changed at about 9 a.m., Tuesday morning, September 11<sup>th</sup>.

As a human being, as a parent, as a professor of Islamic studies, and as a Muslim, my heart keeps on breaking since September 11<sup>th</sup>. I have needed time to grieve those who perished on September 11<sup>th</sup>, and yet there would be no time to grieve. I have moved from grieving the innocent civilians of New York, DC, and Pennsylvania to grieving the innocent civilians of Afghanistan who have been killed in the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, to now anxiously anticipating the next cycle of violence, perhaps in Iraq. So much violence, so much pain, and no time to grieve. From that first morning, and literally every day and every night since then, I have been asked to somehow explain how anyone could have committed the atrocious actions of 9/11. As the

only faculty member on a college campus whose main expertise is the Islamic faith, I have felt the burden to speak and speak again.

I have no “explanations.” There is no justification. None. No matter what the political differences that others may or may not have with U.S. foreign policy, nothing can ever justify the taking of 3,000 innocent civilians. That act was cruel, barbaric, inhumane, and I would add, against the very principles of Islamic teachings. In the months since that terrible Tuesday, I have spoken about the Islamic tradition, the Muslim world in the post-colonial times, and U.S. foreign policies to a whole host of groups ranging from rural churches, urban mosques and synagogues, peace conferences, TV and newspaper reporters, and academic organizations. All too often, I have been the lone Muslim in our local area in addition to being the lone “expert” on Islamic studies. Time and again I have cautioned my audience—and myself—about the dangers of tokenism, reminding most of all myself that my perspective represents only myself, not the one billion plus Muslims all over this planet. Still, speaking out and writing have been one of the few ways I have had to attempt to bring some sense of healing into this so fractured world this past year. For this essay, I would like to share some thoughts and reflections, based on my experiences as a self-identifying progressive Muslim who is privileged by teaching Islam at an elite liberal arts college located in a rural setting in North America.

### Teaching Islam on Tuesday Morning, 11 September 2001

On Tuesday morning of 9/11, I was scheduled to teach two classes. My first class, an introduction to religion, started at 8:30, and ended at 9:45. Unknown to us, safely locked away in the confines of a beautiful classroom, was that at 8:45 and 9:03 a.m. Eastern time, two planes had hit the World Trade Center. My second class, called Experiencing Islam, started at 9:55. Given the quick ten-minute turn around time between the two classes, I was busy checking with the students from my first class to see if they had any questions about the lecture, and going over my lecture notes for the second class. That day we were scheduled to talk about the significance of prayer (*salat* or *namaz*) in Islam. To prepare students for that discussion, I had brought in a CD

of the call to prayer (*adhan*) to play for the students. As the students came into the class, they were greeted with the peaceful sound of the call to prayer. That would be perhaps the last bit of peace in that day, the last bit of peace for many weeks to come.

One of my students, Cat, came in with a disoriented look. She was one of the “cool” kids in my class, with a remarkable combination of smarts and detached sophistication. Yet on this morning, she was clearly dishevelled, disturbed, and disoriented. She came up to me and asked me if we could turn on the radio. Puzzled, I inquired why. She told me that she had heard a plane had had an accident at the World Trade Center in New York. I still remember my first thought upon hearing that. I imagined a small one-person propeller plane, dangerously—perhaps even comically—dangling off the roof of the World Trade Center. Not for one second did I, and I suspect anyone else who heard that brief description, imagine the grave suffering we would soon witness.

Still, for some reason that I could not explain at the time, I felt that we as a class should find out exactly what had happened. We could not pick up the radio signal in our classroom, and given the general level of agitation, I asked my student to accompany me to the student centre, where there is a large screen TV. On the way to the student centre, I stopped for a quick second at a computer cluster, and checked [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), to see if there were any news updates. Instead of bringing up the page instantaneously as it usually did, the Internet stalled. I quickly checked [abcnews.com](http://abcnews.com) and [bbc.com](http://bbc.com). No page came up, just the blasted icon turning and turning endlessly. That was my first indication that something drastic was wrong, that millions of people all over the country were also checking the news. I still remember the sensation of my heart sinking in my chest.

On our way to the student centre, we had already heard that it was not one, but two planes that had hit the World Trade Center. Immediately, I remember having a most uneasy feeling in my stomach. One plane could be an accident. Two planes must be a plan, a sadistic plan. It was a terrorist attack.

Right before entering the student centre, I ran into a student who was at the time the president of the Muslim Student Association. As

one of eight Muslim students (out of a population of 2700 undergraduates) on our none-too-diverse campus and the only student on campus who covered her hair, she stood out easily. She came up to me, and said softly, painfully: “al-salamu ‘alaykum. I pray to God that it was a white redneck who did this.”

She did not elaborate, and she did not have to. For Muslims in America, and for teachers of Islam, more words were not needed. In spite of what it may seem like, her statement was not, I believe, a racist one. Simply put, as a 22-year old she is old enough to have remembered the Oklahoma City bombing which claimed the lives of 168 people. She remembered the subsequent witch-hunt in which many Arabs and Muslims were persecuted before it was discovered that Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were responsible for that heinous crime. Of course the fact that a pair of para-military, right-wing Christian Caucasians were found to be responsible for that crime did not mean that all Christians, all whites, or even all young white male right-wing Christians with a crew-cut were somehow going to become targets of hate crimes. No, in that case it was understood that the crime was somehow that of a small cluster of hateful minds and hearts, and it did not represent the collective will of others who may have looked like them or followed the same faith as them. That, ultimately, is what I believe that student was trying to say. She prayed that it was someone who would be held individually responsible for it, not a whole people. Not another witch hunt. Not another set of hate crimes against Muslims. That, of course, is precisely what would follow in many places.

As a class we went inside the student centre, and joined the dozens of others who were gathered around their TV. I stood with my students, watching in utter horror the pain and suffering that was unfolding before us. By the time we got there, the South Tower had already collapsed. At 10:28, we saw the North tower fall before us, and the infernal tower of ashes spread all over Manhattan. There were over 200 people in that room, and I have never before or since heard it so quiet.

What I have not mentioned yet about my students is that in general, Colgate students are a very privileged bunch who come largely

from well-to-do backgrounds. A high percentage of them come from within one-hour radius of New York City (“The City” as they stubbornly call it). Many of their parents work in the financial district of New York City. For many of them, the inferno that we were witnessing was none other than offices of mommy and daddy.

There were some payphones in the back of the room, and I walked with my students, my friends, as they feverishly tried to call their parents. I stood in silence, with my arm around them, as they tried repeatedly—and failed—to reach their loved ones on overburdened and jammed phone lines. Amazingly, at these moments of great duress, these young souls patiently—and silently—took turns at the phones. Mostly, we sat in silence in front of the TV, watching the vision of hell on earth unfold before our eyes.

After a couple of hours, I left to go home. Partially because I had seen all I could bear, and partially because I felt that I should be home, to protect my family, just in case...

### **Reflections on Islam, at the Community Level**

In reflecting back on the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath, I have usually recalled that when you stir something, two things can rise to the surface: the scum, and the cream. The events of 9/11 have stirred the soul of this great nation and our local community, and as a result both the scum and the cream have risen to the top.

The “cream” of responses around the U.S. is obvious and well-documented: the immediate acts of the ultimate sacrifice by the firefighters and police officers at World Trade Center, the courageous sacrifice by the passengers on the flight over Pennsylvania, the selfless acts of generosity from so many, etc. Those sublime moments have been well documented by others and the mainstream media, and I will only applaud them again.

There have also been less enlightened moments of deep-seated prejudice rising to the surface scum-like, in form of thousands of hate crimes against American citizens of Arab descent or Islamic faith, or those that have simply “looked like” the above. These have gone much less noticed, and I believe that it was part of my task as a teacher of

Islamic studies to call attention to them. Of the first two known casualties of the hate crimes after 9/11, neither victim was in fact Muslim. The first was a Sikh man in Arizona, whose only crime was having brown skin and wearing a turban. In the eyes of his murderer, if it is brown and it wears a turban, it must either be Osama Bin Laden or someone a lot like Osama. The second victim was a Christian Egyptian, a Copt. Hate did not take time to get its victims exactly right.

In the weeks following 9/11, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported 1717 cases of hate crimes against American Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The crimes ranged from police and FBI intimidation (224 cases), hate mails (315 cases),<sup>2</sup> discrimination in school (74 cases), airport profiling (191 cases), discrimination in the workplace (166 cases), death threats (56 cases), bomb threats (16 cases), physical assault and property damage (289 cases), and the largest number, public harassment (372 cases). There were, tragically, 11 death cases.<sup>3</sup> As anyone with experience in matters of reporting harassment or rape knows, it is not unusual for only 10% to 30% of cases to ever be reported. The actual number of hate crimes was easily in the thousands.

I was not exactly sure what to count on here in our small town of 2100 residents after the Tragedy. It is not and has not been easy being Muslim in such a small, largely homogenous place in upstate New York. (Yes, I do have visions of Kermit the Frog's "It's not easy being green" dancing through my head as I write these words.) For much of my time here at Colgate, I have been the only Muslim member of the faculty, my family the only Muslim family at Hamilton, and my son Jacob (a.k.a Ya'qub) the only Muslim child in Hamilton Central School. Out of a population of around 2700 university students, there are usually around 8 Muslim students on Colgate's campus. It is hard to sustain a sense of a spiritual community when the numbers are so small. In my capacity as the advisor to these few Muslim students on campus, we had a meeting on the night of 9/11, to talk about what the campus reaction might be, and what to do in case any of the students on campus were targets of hate crimes. Perhaps the most powerful moment for the Muslim students on campus came that Friday, during a day of communal prayers. The chaplain, Nancy De Vries, organized a session where our president Jane Pinchin, Rabbi Michael Tayvah,

and a number of administrators attended the Muslim prayers on the first Friday after 9/11. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the Muslim students, their silent support spoke more eloquently than any words could have. The message was clear: we will emerge through this chaos as one community. No one shall be left behind.

One of the realizations that I have had post-September 11<sup>th</sup> has been about the extent to which this small university community has become an intimate community for me. The support that colleagues and students have shown my family and the Muslim students has been nothing short of spectacular. Our kind neighbours left their front porch light on for quite a few days, so that we would be more comfortable when the frightening darkness of night time would come. One Hamiltonian neighbour brought us a beautiful basket of flowers. Our rough and tumble neighbour Charlie told my wife Holly that if anyone gave her a hard time, she should go get him, and he would “kick their” behind (except he didn’t use the word “behind”). One of the most meaningful aspects of our life post-9/11 has been getting to know many of our friends in the local churches and Jewish communities better. It is encouraging to know that the small size of our university and small town allows such face-to-face, human-to-human, and heart-to-heart encounters. I know that many who live in larger, more impersonal settings have not been so fortunate.

The response of Colgate and Hamilton has been part of the “cream” that has risen to the top after 9/11. I am so proud of the way that we have dealt with this unimaginable tragedy on this campus. The response started from the day of the attacks, when many students gathered in the student centre to watch that unbelievable vision of hell on Earth unfold before our eyes. The next day, we met early in the morning with the first-year students, then with the students in each of our departments. Early in the afternoon three professors, including myself, addressed the entire campus body of approximately 3,000 people. Standing in the shadows of the Chapel, I remember looking across the gathering of the whole Colgate community and seeing not a faceless crowd, but here a Tushar and there a Nicole, here a Matt and there a Khatera, here a Courtney and there a Nasheed. I recall the familiar faces of students and colleagues who were as full of pain and suffering

and confusion as I was. I remember the humanity, anger and compassion, and yes even pain and fear, in each other's eyes.

It was, for me, a powerful and difficult moment, to teach something about Islam in the midst of all the pain. I talked about the pain that we were all feeling, the numbness, and the confusion. I talked about the calls that were already being heard to punish people responsible for it, whoever they might be. I called for us to pause and give ourselves time to grieve, time to bury our dead, and comfort one another. I called on us to proceed with justice, and not to confuse justice with revenge.

I also talked about Islam. I talked about the fact that we need to take time to figure out who is exactly responsible for this hideous action, and bring them to justice. I also talked about the fact that the actions of 9/11 cannot in any way be reconciled with the highest ideals of the Qur'an, the ones that state if anyone saves a single human life, it is as if they have saved the life of all of humanity; the ones that state that if one takes a single human life, it is as if they have taken the life of all humanity (Qur'an 5:32). I reminded them that to most Muslims, the actions of those who might claim to have undertaken the hideous actions of 9/11 in the name of Islam were as incongruent as the claims of KKK supporters to base their message of hate on Christian teachings are to most Christians. All traditions have their zealots.

I reminded them of the poem by Sa'di, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet:

*The Children of Adam are members of one body,  
made from the same source.*

*If one feels pain,  
the others cannot be indifferent to it.*

*If you are unmoved by the suffering of others,  
you are not worthy of the name human being.*

—Sa'di, *The Rose Garden*

And in what would be the first of many difficult public statements, I told the campus body that I hold them accountable to a higher standard than that displayed by President Bush in a speech on TV the



night before. The President had stated that we must “hunt down the faceless enemy.” I reminded all of us that one could not hunt something that is faceless, unless one is willing to stoop to the level of persecution and witch-hunt. We first had to identify those responsible for this hideous action, and then hold them and only them responsible for it, not an entire block of humanity.

Perhaps from someone else, someone with a longer history of political activism, those statements may not have seemed so shocking. But I had spent the better part of the past ten years avoiding radical political statements. As an Iranian-American who had lived through the 1979 revolution and the decade-long Iran-Iraq war, I had long ago decided to eschew overt public political talk. My scholarly research had largely consisted of the metaphysical speculation of pre-modern Muslim mystics (Sufis), an area that I had hoped would allow me to safely avoid the political intrigues of the Muslim world and that of the Muslim world vis-à-vis the West. That luxury (if it ever really existed, which I now seriously doubt), evaporated on 11 September 2001.

On that Sunday, we had a memorial service for the sixteen members of the Colgate family who perished on September 11<sup>th</sup>. The memorial service featured a reading from the Qur’an, alongside that of passages from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.

### **Imam or Islamicist?**

Another very difficult role that many of us, teachers of Islamic studies, are being asked and will be asked to play, is to somehow be a liaison between the Muslim students organization and the administration. Let me add that not all of us who are asked to take on such a role are Muslim. Let us remember that the overwhelming majority of MSA’s around the country do not have a figurehead in charge that would correspond to the Jewish rabbi, or Protestant chaplain. Increasingly, many such organizations, including the one at Colgate, are put under the chaplain’s office or the office of religious life. Part of what makes this an awkward arrangement for many of us, no doubt, is that the Islamicists on campus are being asked to speak “devotionally” alongside Christian ministers and Jewish rabbis, and even lead joint prayer

services. Many of us are not used to seeing ourselves in such “minister” roles, and some of us have even spent a good bit of our lives distinguishing between academic study of a subject and a confessional practice of it. I also feel that way, and a few times in the past months I have felt that people did expect me to become “Imam Omid,” offering pastoral care. That is not a role that I have always been comfortable with, but it seemed to me that in these grave times it was more important to have some words of compassion and reason to share. I have no desire to become “Imam Omid,” but perhaps I can speak from an academic perspective as a human being—who happens to be Muslim—and is terribly concerned both about this catastrophic human tragedy and the cycles of violence that it has unleashed.

### The Study of Islam Section Web Page

Much like myself, many of the colleagues who teach Islam studies are situated in small, isolated, rural locations. Ideally, these are some of the very experts who at this crucial time would seek to explain things to the wider public. But how do you get the collective wisdom and voice of these people together? How do you make it publicly known and accessible?

Even on the very day of 9/11, it was clear to me that we had to act publicly, quickly, carefully, and compassionately. With the non-stop news coverage, there had to be a way of getting a more reasonable, careful voice out into the public. As for myself, I know that being situated in rural upstate New York, there was not a great deal that I could do in terms of accessing national news media. So the answer seemed clear: a web page.

I started the Study of Islam Web Response to 9/11 web page literally on the night of 9/11. It went up on September 12<sup>th</sup>. When I started the web page, I had no idea that it would eventually reach some 95 countries, and over 15,000 viewers. If I had, I would have picked an easier URL than <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/response.htm>!

The goals of the web page were modest: put online the response from the American Academy of Religion Study of Islam section, add a

few basic statements from various Muslim spokespersons, and include calls for mutual understanding and patience in these very difficult times. There was one other element that I knew from the start: it had to have pictures. I wanted to include pictures of Muslims and others from around the world sharing their grief and sympathy with those of us who have lost loved ones here. After 9/11, CNN repeatedly showed the same disturbing footage of 10-12 Palestinians dancing in the streets. While CNN certainly has the right to show that footage, I have wondered many times why they have not shown the pictures of a million Palestinian children standing for five minutes of silence to honour those who perished on 9/11. I wonder why they have not shown prayer vigils and peace rallies that took place in Muslim countries ranging from Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Iran.<sup>4</sup> I wonder why they have not fully documented the statements from leading Muslim scholars and organizations condemning the terrorist attack? Why show that same disturbing footage ad nauseam? Is it because psychologically we *want* to think that the rest of the world hates us? In many ways, I specifically envisioned the Study of Islam web page as an antidote to hyper-patriotic, “It is us against the rest of the world” coverage of much of the mainstream media’s coverage of the tragedy and its aftermath.

Another theme was also clear to me, and it was one that in the days to come would earn us both praise and criticism. Again, as a response to the deafening clamour calling for blood and war, I wanted to highlight voices (Muslim and non-Muslim) that were seeking non-violent options first, voices like the 1987 Nobel Peace Laureate Oscar Arias who stated: “It is essential that justice be done, and it is equally vital that justice not be confused with revenge, for the two are wholly different.”<sup>5</sup>

The response to the web page overall has been phenomenal, and almost overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps the greatest indication of its success was that we had no way of disseminating the information on this page apart from relying on folks to pass it on to their friends and students. This they did, and at a rate we could not have foreseen: the site has been used as a resource in some 95 countries. There were stories on the site in a number of national news media, including the *New*

*York Times* (Stille 2001). The folks from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* also did an extensive interview about the page.

There were, of course, a few negative comments here and there. The negative feedback was almost evenly divided: half of it was from people who were convinced that Islam was a fanatic religion, full of hatred for the rest of humanity. No amount of statements from the Qur'an or Muslim leaders condemning the 9/11 attacks would change their minds. (Why let facts get in the way? They just complicate things....) The other set of responses were from extremist Muslims that objected to my inclusion of statements of peace from such luminaries as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Dalai Lama. One such extremist called Gandhi a "godless Hindu," and objected to my inclusion of Gandhi's "An eye for an eye, and the whole world goes blind"!

Perhaps the more controversial aspect of the web page came about when the U.S. government started the military campaign against Afghanistan. I felt that it was important to document the civilian casualty in this campaign, and give an accurate picture of the duress facing the transplanted and homeless millions of Afghans. Many people who contacted me objected to what they felt was the "unpatriotic" nature of criticizing the war effort in Afghanistan. From my perspective, however, it was completely consistent with my stance against the hideous actions leading to 9/11. In both cases, I have attempted to uphold the nonnegotiable sanctity of human life, all human life all over this small planet. American lives are sacred, as are those of Afghans. With the ever-expanding nature of the so-called "War on Terrorism," I have found myself gradually being more and more of an anti-war activist, and a defender of civil liberties. (Some of my thoughts on these matters appear in Safi 2002.) I have also included pictures on the site of the Afghani civilians who became victims of the "war on terrorism" even though they were in no way responsible for the actions of 9/11.<sup>6</sup> I don't think that most Americans realize that by now there have been at least as many, and I would suspect more, civilian casualties in Afghanistan than those who perished in the States on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Yet their deaths are largely relegated to a footnote on the "War on Terrorism." The loss of their lives is buried under vile euphemisms such as "collateral damage," and we are told to understand that war is

a messy business and there will be some innocent loss of life. I seriously doubt if any one who lost a loved one on 9/11 would be consoled by such callous words.

On the web page, I also highlighted the plight of the approximately 6 million migrant Afghanis. It was concern for the welfare of these civilians that led the UN Human Rights commissioner, Mary Robinson, to call for a pause in the U.S.-led air strikes against Afghanistan to allow vital aid to be taken in. She had stated that the pause was needed to enable humanitarian agencies to gain access before winter sets in (12 October 2001).<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, her plea and others like hers were not heeded.

Jon Brockopp and Zayn Kassam have indicated in their essays in this volume the collaborative efforts that went into producing the joint statement from the Study of Islam section, and I will not duplicate their work here. What needs to be added is the way in which the Study of Islam listserv and e-mail discussions quickly became a haven of sanity and support for the Islamicists around North America. My favourite unofficial joke was, "Have you hugged your Islamicist today?" They did all look like they could use a hug! More seriously, we talked about everything ranging from what various Islamic legal sources might have to say about issues of suicide and martyrdom, to strategies in handling newspaper and TV interviews, to how to manage the incredible pressures that all of us felt during the forthcoming weeks and months. Without the friendship, wisdom, intellectual resources, spiritual fellowship, and emotional support of friends spread far and wide, this isolated, lonely Islamicist would not have made it through the Fall of 2001. This gives me an opportunity to discuss the pressures that most of us, particularly those of us who were the sole person on a college campus to represent the Muslim world and/or Islam, were under at this time.

## The Pressures of Responding to 9/11

The collective weight of making sense of all the non-sense approached a crushing level at times. I was trying to maintain my duties as a husband and a father to our two children. I was teaching an overload of courses, three each semester. As a junior faculty member, I was in that crucial stage of alchemically transmuting my long and unwieldy dissertation (nicknamed “cure for insomnia”) into a readable (translation: publishable) manuscript. In addition to those, I took on what felt like a never-ending barrage of interviews. At its height—or worst, depending on one’s perspective—that meant about four hours of phone interviews per night. A colleague in the department—who was concerned about the impact this would have on my teaching and scholarship, and prospects for tenure—suggested that I keep track of them, to be able to offer them as evidence of community service, an important category for tenure at our college. I lost track after about 150 interviews.

Part of the problem is with our rural location, part of it with the way that the academy has systematically neglected Islam and the Muslim world. Our college is located in rural upstate New York. The closest college to us, Hamilton College, does not have an Islamicist. Cornell University is about an hour and half away. Syracuse University is about an hour away.<sup>8</sup> Going in other directions, one can go for about two or three hours to the north or east before getting to another university with a fulltime person trained in Islamic studies. At times, it has felt like every church and every reporter from those areas without an Islamicist had my home phone number on their speed-dial. Needless to say, it put a great deal of pressure on my family life, teaching, and scholarship.

In terms of my own college, the days past September 11<sup>th</sup> also demonstrated how the Muslim world was one of the biggest gaps across our curriculum. We did not have scholars at the college whose primary area of expertise was in some of the areas most necessary: history, political science, anthropology, women’s studies, etc. This created a particularly difficult situation, as I have been adamant that it is not enough to simply look to an ethereal, idealized notion of “Islam” to understand the context for 9/11. One must be able to situate groups

like al-Qaeda in context of other violent movements that adopt—or steal, depending on your perspective—religious language. Some of these movements are covered in Mark Juergensmeyer’s valuable work, *Terror and the Mind of God* (2000). Lastly, I have argued that it was vital for us to understand the long history of colonialism and imperialism in these parts of the world, which have directly fuelled the rise of anti-colonial and then post-colonial movements. I have insisted that our discussions include a historical component that situates al-Qaeda in the network of violent post-colonial movements in the Muslim world. “Islam,” I have emphasized, was one and not necessarily the most important framework needed to make sense out of the non-sense of 9/11.

### On Jihad

In spite of the above, what everyone wanted to talk about, of course, was *Jihad*. Like *Karma* and *Nirvana*, Jihad seems bound to be absorbed into mainstream American parlance, even if like those two previous terms its popular understanding was perhaps a great distortion of the original meaning.

Many TV commentators (and political scientists) have been naively translating the term as “holy war.” *Jihad*, like many other terms in religious traditions, is a complex and contested term (for one take on the evolution of the concept of *jihad*, see Peters 1996). The original meaning of the term, as it is used in the Qur’an, is not “holy war” but merely “struggle” and “striving” for a cause. In the Qur’an, the believers are told to “struggle” in the path of God using their own souls and possessions (see, e.g., Qur’an 8:72, 9:20, 9:41, and 9:88, where the believers are described as those who do struggle in the path of God with “their possessions and their souls”). There are other words in the Qur’an that mean “fight” (such as *qital*; see, e.g., 2:216, 2:246) and even “war” (*harb*; see, e.g., 2:279), but *jihad* certainly does *not* primarily mean war, and even less so “holy war” (something of an oxymoron to my own ears, having lived through the vicious Iran-Iraq war in my childhood). Prophet Muhammad himself is to have stated that there are two types of *jihad*, the “big” *jihad* that is against one’s own selfish

tendencies, and the “small” *jihad* that is against injustice and oppression in the society. This is how the overwhelming majority of Muslims have historically understood the term *Jihad*.<sup>9</sup>

One of the distinguishing features of war in Islamic law is that it is recognized practically as a human phenomenon that all societies engage in. Since all societies fight, the perspective of expositors of Islamic tradition has been to at least have humanity fight in a restrained manner. To not have such restrictions, from this perspective, would simply result in even greater chaos. As the Qur’an states: “*Fight in the path of God those who have begun a fight against you, but do not transgress the limits. Indeed God does not love the transgressors*” (Qur’an 2:190). These limits have been clearly identified through the example of Prophet Muhammad and enshrined in Islamic law (*Shari’a*): One is not allowed to kill civilians, not allowed to kill women and children, not allowed to kill the elderly, not allowed to kill animals, cut down trees, or poison a water well.<sup>10</sup> There is simply no way that the killing of 3,000 innocent civilians could ever be justified under Islamic law.

The term “jihad,” like the term “crusade” in the history of Christianity, has been and continues to be evoked by a wide range of political figures to justify their own ideological agendas. Ayatollah Khomeini called for a *jihad* against Iraq, Saddam Hussein called for a *jihad* against the U.S. As one American Muslim intellectual has quipped, now every Tom, Dick, and Abdullah is calling for *jihad*. The ambiguity of terms like “jihad” and “crusade” is that they are open to interpretation—and thus abuse.<sup>11</sup> Jihad may be legitimately undertaken to fight injustice and oppression. In fact, this is how many of the social movements that have fought sexism and racism in Muslim societies have justified themselves. Naturally, though, we also have situations where demagogues invoke *jihad* to support their own causes, just as in the history of Christianity we have the call for crusade being used to support all types of dubious causes.

### So, What Does Islam Really Say?

Since 9/11, one of the most common experiences of all of us who teach Islamic studies has been facing the earnest question: “So, what does



Islam *really* say about violence?"<sup>12</sup> The questions are usually well-intentioned. There is a sincere plea for us to muster all of our scholarly authority to unequivocally state that there is no relationship whatsoever between the beautiful teachings of Islam and the hateful words and deeds of Osama bin Laden. Faced with such questions, and the brevity of the time and space to go into depth, many of us have found our initial reactions to be that of "Islam is a religion of peace." As with many of my colleagues, I also found myself repeating such statements the first few days after 9/11. And yet, for some reason, this simplistic response has left a not altogether satisfactory feeling behind—at least in my own mind.

Had I not spent the better part of my own training and teaching trying to avoid grand generalizations? Had we not worked so hard to critique orientalist assumptions and essentializations that described Islam as religion of Law, of Unity, of the "Semitic Mind," of the "Arab mind," of every other "single-key" explanation? Have we not strived to emphasize the historical, cultural, and intellectual diversity of the Islamic experience? While it is understandable that at such a time of crisis we would find refuge in "Islam a religion of peace," I yearned to rise above that nicety and find a framework for deeper, more honest, more difficult, and perhaps more truthful conversations.

### **Beyond Apologetics**

Not surprisingly, this meant an immediate departure from the language of apologetics. Let me try to be clear here. I consider myself someone who was not just born into a Muslim cultural heritage, but makes a choice every morning to dedicate myself to a life of Submission to the Divine, based on the guidance of the Qur'an, the example of Muhammad, and later Sufi teachers. At a fundamental level, I do believe that the Islamic tradition offers peace, both in the heart and for the world at large (when the Islamic imperatives for social justice are implemented).

Part of the challenge of the past few months has been coming to terms with a painfully brutal, yet perhaps intellectually honest reality that recognizes that there are many ways of talking about religion.

Two of them seem to have gained prominence in the post-9/11 world. One level is a normative, theological way, when self-designated (or selected) representatives speak with the weight of authority, and feel perfectly entitled to make statements like “the Catholic Faith states...”, “the Jewish faith teaches us that...”, and of course, “the Islamic faith states...” The other way of talking about religion is more historical, less theological, and more people-centred. The followers of this perspective might state: “This Jewish group practices the following ritual, while other Jewish groups practice otherwise...”; “These Muslim groups hold this interpretation of Jihad, while their interpretations are opposed by the following groups....”

I find myself increasingly on the side of the second way of talking. While there are times and places that the majority of Muslim scholars have formed a clear enough consensus (*ijma'*) on issues so as to allow us to speak of near unanimity, on other issues—precisely those that many non-Muslims would be interested in hearing about—there have been and continue to be a wide range of interpretations and practices among Muslim scholars and communities. I see it as my task as an Islamicist to not bury the difference among Muslims in the interest of 30-second spots. I think it is imperative on us to demonstrate the spectrum of interpretations, particularly in dealing with the “difficult” issues (gender constructions, violence, pluralism, etc.).

Furthermore, I find myself being less and less patient and satisfied with “Islam teaches us” language. Islam teaches us nothing. Prophet Muhammad does. Interpretive communities do. One could argue that God does, through the text of the Qur’an. But even in the case of texts, there are human beings who read the texts, interpret them, and expound their meanings. Even in the case of the Prophet, our encounter with the Prophet is driven by different (and competing) textual presentations of him.<sup>13</sup> In all cases, the dissemination of divine teachings is achieved through human agency. To drive this message home, I usually offer this intentionally irreverent comment to my students: Islam does not get up in the morning. Islam does not brush its teeth. Islam does not take a shower. Islam eats nothing. And perhaps most importantly for our consideration, Islam says nothing. *Muslims* do.

Muslims get up in the morning, Muslims brush their teeth, Muslims shower, Muslims eat, and Muslims speak.

Is this just semantics? I do not believe so. My experience, at the level of both devotional and academic communities has been that many people simply ascribe their own (or their own community's) interpretations of Islam to "Islam states," and use such authoritative—and authoritarian—language as a way to close the discussion. And closing discussions is something that we can no longer afford at this point.<sup>14</sup>

### Islamic Studies and Politics After 9/11

So, where do we go from here? What is our task in teaching Islam after 9/11? What social and political ramifications does the teaching of Islamic studies have today?

I will not presume to speak on behalf of anyone other than myself. Some have suggested that part of our mission should be pointing out the examples of *tolerance* towards non-Muslims in the Islamic heritage, and also instilling *tolerance* towards Muslims in our students. I beg to differ. I am not interested *per se* in teaching "tolerance." Allow me to elaborate: the root of the term *tolerance* comes from medieval toxicology and pharmacology, focusing on how much poison a body could "tolerate" before it would succumb to death. I refuse to participate in a system that conceives of its own civilization as the privileged host into which knowledge about the "other" is incorporated as a foreign object or parasite. Our task, I believe, should somehow be grander than finding out how much knowledge of all the disenfranchised and marginalized groups we can *tolerate* before it kills us! Rather, I see our mission as nothing short of the grand task of full engagement with the complexities of humanity, defined not based on the norms of any one civilization, but globally. Part of this mission consists of undertaking a more critical examination of our position in the world, particularly given our place of privilege and prominence. If we are to have any hope of getting anywhere resembling peace, that examination needs to include both the greatest accomplishments of all civilizations, and also a painful scrutiny of ways in which our place of privilege has come at a

great cost to others. It means a critical study of not just our subject matters, but also of our own selves, and our own communities.

As for me personally, this has also meant being more outspoken not just as a scholar of Islamic Studies with a particular fondness for pre-modern Sufi love poetry, but also a modern (and yikes, even post-modern) self-identifying Progressive Muslim spokesperson and activist. Since 9/11, I have worked with other progressive Muslims in this country and beyond to articulate a historically accurate, non-idealized, now challenged now challenging, view of Islam with the uncompromising emphasis on social justice, equality, and pluralism. One of the first fruits of these conversations is the forthcoming volume *Progressive Muslims Speak*, in which fourteen contemporary Muslim intellectuals (all of whom are also teachers of Islamic Studies) talk frankly about challenges facing Islam and Muslim communities today. It is our assertion that just as interpretations of Islam have been part of the problem in the past and today, new progressive interpretations of Islam can and should be part of the solution (Safi forthcoming).

The fluid boundary between being a professing Muslim and a Muslim professor (to excuse the pun) is one that has been receiving a great deal of attention in religious studies, albeit usually in the case of other religious traditions.<sup>15</sup> I would state that my own approach is informed by recent developments in feminist hermeneutics, anthropology, and post-colonial studies. I refuse to stand on the mythical “cloud of objectivity” and pretend that my own view is somehow naively impartial and completely objective. Of course I do take my role in presenting different aspects and interpretations of Islam quite seriously: in my classes the students will encounter the Islamic experience as interpreted by Sunni ‘ulama, Sufi mystics, philosophical pundits, political theorists, devotional hymnists, film makers, court poets, contemporary feminists, and Shi’i scholars. While presenting these manifold faces of Islam to them, I also see it as the intellectually honest step to position my own perspective as that of a self-identifying progressive Muslim who speaks out against sexist, racist, and classist practices in Muslim societies and the U.S. It is from such a perspective that I have spoken out against the hideous actions of those who brought so much suffering to New York, DC, and Pennsylvania on 9/11, and one who continues

to speak out against the unchecked exertion of U.S. power in response to 9/11, first in Afghanistan, and soon perhaps in Iraq. My experience over the past year has been that most of my students respect the above, so long as I continue to be consistent in critiquing not just the U.S., but also Muslim societies for similar sins. Also, many of them want to see not just a “deconstruction,” but also a viable, compassionate, pluralist alternative being proposed.

### Islamic Studies Beyond “Clash of Civilizations”

We live in a world that some would see as doomed to an inevitable “Clash of Civilizations,” to recall Samuel Huntington’s trite and cliché analysis of post-Cold War politics (Huntington 1993; see also his book length treatment of this theory in Huntington 1996). Even as other scholars have offered devastating critiques of the above theory,<sup>16</sup> Huntington and his ilk continue to find a receptive audience both in the State Department and in the larger public. Let us remember that the most recent title on Islam to end up on the best selling list was the regrettable *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, written by none other than the noted critic—less generous souls might say hater—of modern Muslims (read: Arabs), Bernard Lewis. In fairness to Lewis, he is an avid admirer of the subtlety and complexity of pre-modern Muslim society. It is, rather, in the Muslim encounter with modernity that Lewis repeatedly falls back on descriptions like “poor,” “weak,” “ignorant,” “disappointing,” “humiliating,” “corrupt,” “impoverished,” etc. All of the above adjectives are simply from one page (151) of *What Went Wrong!* Lewis, who gave the very phrase “Clash of Civilizations” to Huntington, has been bandying his worn out thesis of “the roots of Muslim Rage” for decades now, and has yet again found a new audience for his ideas (Lewis 1990). The very last paragraph of Lewis’ *What Went Wrong* starts with this sentence: “If the peoples of the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region...” (Lewis 2002, 159). In reading Lewis’ verdict, one can not help but wonder if in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, any other group of humanity apart from Middle Easterners/Muslims would be described as a whole

by being represented by a suicide bomber. One can only imagine the outrage that would be felt and heard from many corners if instead of talking about Middle Easterners (read: Muslims), one had described all Chinese, all Africans, all women, all Jews, or all Hindus in such a derogatory fashion.

Faced with the clout, prestige, and access to media and print of the Huntingtons and Lewises of the world, what is one Islamicist in a liberal arts college, in a rural corner of upstate New York to do?

In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. published a monumental essay titled *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos Or Community?* Dr. King ended this essay by stating: “We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation” (King, Jr. 1986, 633). I too believe that we as members of one humanity, as North Americans, and as members of the academy we have a choice. I pray that we may have the courage to heal this fractured world. That healing process is one that for me by necessity has an intellectual and academic component. My part of contributing to the healing is through teaching Islamic studies. I refuse to reduce the complexity of the heritage of the Muslims’ encounter with the Divine simply to “history,” “philosophy,” “metaphysics,” or even “theology.” For me, the key challenge of teaching Islamic studies is the same now as it was before 11 September 2001; it is only heightened now. The challenge is to position Islamic studies as the empathic engagements with human beings in their quest for ultimate meaning with God, one another, and the cosmos. It is to bring our own humanity, whether as progressive Muslim professor or non-Muslim student, to the engagement with these fellow members of the human race. Human beings must remain at the centre, with all of their humanity, aspirations for beauty, and gross imperfections. Can we live up to the challenge laid forth to us by Prophet Muhammad and the Persian poet Sa’di, to envision all of us as members of one body, to feel the pain of another as our own? Perhaps only then we will be worthy of the name human being.

In conclusion, I would like to end with two statements from two of the luminous souls who are proudly displayed on the Study of Islam Response to 9/11 web page. Their words sum up everything I would like to say, and then some. The first is a letter from His Holiness the

Dalai to President Bush after 9/11, and the second a statement from Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am confident that the United States as a great and powerful nation will be able to overcome this present tragedy.

*The American people have shown their resilience, courage and determination when faced with such difficult and sad situations.*

*It may seem presumptuous on my part, but I personally believe we need to think seriously whether a violent reaction is the right thing to do and in the greater interest of the nation and people in the long run.*

*I believe violence will only increase the cycle of violence.*

*But how do we deal with hatred and anger which are often the root causes of such senseless violence?*

*This is a very difficult question, especially when it concerns a nation and we have certain fixed conceptions of how to deal with such attacks. I am sure you will make the right decision.*

*With my prayers and good wishes,  
Yours sincerely,*

—The Dalai Lama

*The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.*

*Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it...  
Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate.*

*In fact, violence merely increases hate...  
Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,  
adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.*

*Darkness cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

—Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“And Towards God We Are ever-Returning” (Qur’an)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cair-net.org>. The number was last updated as of 8 February 2002.

<sup>2</sup> While perhaps all of these numbers are vastly underreported, I can personally vouch that the number of hate mail cases was of an exponentially higher number than that reported by CAIR. Due to the various discussion groups that I am on, in the one week after 9/11 alone I (and everyone on those groups) had received approximately 1300 pieces of hate e-mail. These ranged from simple exclamations: “Why did *you people* do it? What had they done to you?” to specific threats against our families, some even threatening to pave the street with our blood.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cair-net.org/html/bycategory.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> One of the pictures that elicited the most feedback was that of the impromptu peace rally in the streets of Tehran, complete with that most wonderful of traditions, a candle light vigil. See “Expressions of Grief and Sympathy in the Arab and Muslim World” <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/response.htm>. How ironic that a short few weeks later, President Bush alienated many of the same Iranians who marched to show their support for victims of 9/11 when he branded Iran part of the “Axis of Evil,” a remark which clearly did not take into consideration the support of the majority of Iranians for the progressive President Khatami. Khatami has for years been calling for a respectful dialogue with the West.

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Arias’ statements were featured on a web page titled: “The Peacemakers Speak,” at <http://www.thecommunity.com/crisis/>.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to point out that such civilian casualties have continued long after the most intense period of bombing in late Fall and Winter of 2001. In the first days of July 2002, American planes looking for al-Qaeda bombed an Afghan wedding party, killing 48 women and children. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/08/international/asia/08VILL.html>.

<sup>7</sup> The BBC and European press covered the human cost of this war much more honestly and sympathetically than CNN, which largely abdicated its independent journalistic integrity and responsibility to ask critical questions by simply becoming a mouthpiece for the State Department. See BBC’s “Millions at Risk” ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south\\_asia/newsid\\_1598000/1598797.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1598000/1598797.stm)).

<sup>8</sup> Exasperating the matter of the paucity of experts of Islamic studies has been the fact that many Islamicists have been understandably reticent to speak publicly about such complicated issues, particularly when their analysis might include criticisms of U.S. foreign policy as part of a larger discussion. With the passing of the so-called PATRIOT bill and other erosions of civil rights, many



experts of Islamic studies—particularly the many who are not U.S. citizens—have been rightly concerned that in these hyper-patriotic times, any criticism of the U.S. government might lead to their deportation. The effect of such draconian measures on college campuses is discussed in the AP report: “College Staff Find Chilling Free Speech Climate” (<http://www.indybay.org/news/2001/10/106371.php>).

<sup>9</sup> One has to admit that some later jurists did collapse *jihad* to the external layer of fighting in the external realm. However, their impact was always balanced by the injunctions in the Qur’an (discussed above) on one hand, and the Sufi prioritization of the inner *jihad*.

<sup>10</sup> For one such set of limitations, see al-Misri 1991, 603-604. Al-Misri’s description of the rules of jihad conforms mostly, though not completely, to the above list.

<sup>11</sup> Thus the uproar in the Muslim world when in the days after 9/11, President Bush unwisely described the American response as a “Crusade.” While the President perhaps intended a meaning along the lines of a “valiant effort,” to many Muslim ears the term crusade still has the connotation of an aggressive, Christian attack against Muslims. Or was that a Freudian slip?

<sup>12</sup> For a highly sensitive and intelligent discussion of the complicated discourse of violence and Islam see Lawrence 1998.

<sup>13</sup> I am here referring to the vastly different corpus of *hadith* collections that purport to contain the statements of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>14</sup> Among contemporary Muslim authors, one of the most eloquent critics of authoritarian tendencies has been Khaled Abou El Fadl (particularly in his 2001).

<sup>15</sup> One of the more insightful collections is that of *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (McCuthcheon 1999). Of particular relevance are the essays by David J. Hufford “The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies,” and Martin S. Jaffee “Fessing Up in Theory: On *Professing* and *Confessing* in the Religious Studies Classroom.”

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most detailed, insightful, and devastating critique of Huntington was that offered by his Harvard colleague, Roy Mottahedeh. Mottahedeh, surely one of the top Middle Eastern historians of this generation, offered a point-by-point refutation of Huntington (1996).

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