Islam and Violence

James D. Chancellor

James D. Chancellor is W. O. Carver Professor of Christian Missions and World Religions at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has a rich background in the studies of world religions and religious pluralism and has specialized in Islamic culture and New Religious Movements. Dr. Chancellor has taught in several countries and is the author of *Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (Syracuse University Press, 2000).

Introduction

Before offering any observations regarding the relationship between Islam and violence, it is necessary to reflect briefly on my ability to make such observations. I have studied Islam for the past twenty-five years. I have visited numerous Muslim nations, living and studying in Egypt, Nigeria, Malaysia, and the Philippines. For nearly a month, I lived with a group of Muslim fundamentalist men on the banks of the Nile. I have had encounters at various levels with Muslim scholars and lay people from around the world. So, I am hopeful of offering some cogent observations. However, I am not a Muslim; I am a Baptist. I no longer read the Qur'an in Arabic, nor do I fellowship with Muslims. As a Western Christian, my view will of necessity be one "from the outside." I will attempt to step outside those limitations, but it is not easy. The task is made even more difficult by the recent murder of several members of my own faith community by a Muslim who was apparently motivated by religious concerns. I will do my best to offer a fair and balanced understanding of this most difficult issue.

Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, I have been asked any number of questions regarding Islam and these terrible acts of murder. The two most common are "Does bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network represent 'true Islam'?" and "Are such violent attacks on innocent people consistent with the Qur'an?" Neither of these questions is particularly wise. The first assumes Islam is some kind of objective reality, clear and definable, by which the actions of all Muslims can be judged. Rather, Islam is a dynamic and varied religious tradition. In a real sense, Islam is what Muslims think, say, and do—as Muslims. And since there are nearly a billion Muslims spread over much of the globe, Islam is a varied and most complex phenomenon. Clearly what is "true Islam" to one Muslim is not to another.

As to the teaching of the Qur'an, a similar observation is to be made. Regardless of what the words are, the Qur'an means what Muslims believe it means. And again, that varies widely from community to community, and individual to individual. And certainly a Western Christian is in no more a position to say what it "really" means than an Arab Muslim is in a position to say what the Bible "really" means.

But regardless of these limitations, we are still faced with the fact of "Islamic violence," and we need to come to terms with it as best as possible. While it is certainly true that most Muslims are not terrorists, it is also true that in our current climate, most terrorists are Muslim. President Bush has told us on any number of occasions that Islam is a religion of peace. He has also informed us that we worship the "same God." Franklin Graham has told us that Islam is an "evil religion." Neither of these men is particularly well-informed about the Islamic world, but they do help frame the question. Is violence more "at home" in the Muslim world? Or more precisely, is Islam intrinsically violent?

The Nature of Religious Violence

Before exploring that question, it is good to define clearly what we mean by "religious violence." Virtually all human soci-

eties are religious to one degree or another. And all human societies are violent, to one degree or another. When we speak of "religious violence," we are not simply speaking of violence done by religious people. While one might make a case for the Assyrians of late antiquity and the Mongols of the thirteenth century, it is hard to imagine a more violent people than twentieth century Western Christians. Millions upon millions of people perished in the conflicts of the twentieth century, conflicts primarily involving the "Christian" nations of the West. But while it may be true that most of the men who attacked Pearl Harbor were Buddhists, that most of the men who dropped the atomic bombs on Japan were "Christians," and many of those who were responsible for the Holocaust were baptized Lutherans, none of these acts can be described as "religious violence." For our purposes, religious violence is characterized as violent acts done by religious people as religious people, informed and legitimized by a religious vision, and for the purpose of achieving specifically religious goals.

Human history offers us many examples of religious violence. It is hard to imagine a more "peaceful" religion than Buddhism, yet the martial arts spring directly from Chan (Zen) Buddhism. For centuries, Korea boasted orders of "warrior monks." Unfortunately, our own faith tradition offers far too many examples of religious violence: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the murder of thousands of Anabaptists, the execution of heretics in Geneva, constant conflicts between Catholic and Orthodox believers in Eastern Europe, and the murder of hundreds of thousands of "witches" throughout late medieval Europe. Clearly, religious violence has not been limited to the Islamic world.

The Modern Transition

Beginning in the seventeenth century, a profound ideological shift began in the Christian West. This shift is a significant component of what we have come to know as modernity. Gradually, but steadily, religious institutions and religion itself began to be separated from the state and thus from the exercise of political power. This ideological shift was given considerable impetus by the formation of the first secular state, the United States of America. The U. S. Constitution is, to my knowledge, the first political document in human history that makes no claim to divine sanction, and no reference whatsoever to God. This "secularization" of the political apparatus moved steadily, so that by the twentieth century the view that it is inappropriate for religious actors and institutions to employ the power of the state to achieve their religious goals had become normative, for believers and non-believers alike. And since the state is the only agent within society authorized to employ violence to achieve its goals (war and the justice system), a corollary of this process is the elimination of violence as a legitimate tool of the religious enterprise. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the vast majority of those in the modern West now view religious violence not only as illegitimate, but abhorrent and evil.

It should be noted here that while this position represents the vast majority of Western Christians, it is not necessarily the "Christian" perspective. Philip Jenkins has brought sharp focus to the fact that the majority of practicing Christians no longer reside in the modern West, but rather in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.[1] Many of these Christian communities have not

experienced the ideological transformation of modernity and, on occasion, employ religious violence. The Naga peoples of northeast India, the Igbo of southern Nigeria, and the indigenous Fijians come to mind immediately.

The Case of Islam

Given the persistence of religious violence across time and across traditions, we are still faced with the present reality of "Islamic terrorism" and repeated savage acts against innocent persons in the name of Islam. These acts require us to frame the question: "Is Islam more prone to violence?" Or more precisely: "Is religious violence more at home in Islam than in other religions." The simple answer to that question is "yes."[2]

President George Bush was rightly motivated when he declared Islam to be a religion of peace and that the September 11 terrorists had "hijacked" Islam. He hoped to prevent unjust retaliation against innocent Muslim people living in the United States and to attempt to dispel the notion that the coming response to the September 11 tragedy would be an attack against Islam. However, right motivation does not necessarily lead to right observation. Islam is not a religion of peace. There are a number of internal dynamics that create strong predilections toward the use of force and violence to make the Islamic vision a reality on the earth. The first and most obvious is the clear teachings of the sacred literature and subsequent theological constructs. Jihad, or "striving for Islam,"[3] is a clear and unambiguous component of the Islamic faith: "Prescribed for you is fighting, though it be hateful to you. Yet it may happen that you will hate a thing which is better for you; and it may happen that you will love a thing which is

worse for you: God knows, and you know not" (Surah 2:216).[4]

There is a strong spiritual tradition that teaches the struggle with one's own desires and passions is the "greater Jihad" and the physical struggle with an enemy is the "lesser Jihad." Nonetheless, the Islamic tradition, in both classical and contemporary manifestations, not only sanctions warfare and violence, but also clearly establishes religion and religious goals as a *casus belli*—a justification of war. The Qur'an makes abundantly clear that God will base his judgment of men on their willingness to fight "in the path of God": "Those believers who sit at home, other than the disabled, are not on equal level with those who strive in the path of God. … God has promised good to each, but God distinguished those who strive above those who sit with a great reward" (Surah 4:95).

To my knowledge, Islam is the only faith that declares fleeing the battlefield to be a grave sin (Surah 8:16). Jihad is indeed the "sixth pillar" of the Islamic faith, and modern attempts to minimize or evade this reality are both exegetically and historically imaginative.

However, identifying Jihad as an essential component of Islam merely describes; it does not explain. There is a reason for Jihad and, thus, religious violence. And that reason lies in the very nature of the Islamic vision. Islam is certainly a religion, but it is not merely a religion, or at least not merely a religion in the modern Western sense of the word. Islam is a self-contained and fully-articulated program for the complete ordering of human society. From the very beginning, Islam was directed squarely at the social fabric and quickly developed a comprehensive program for all of human conduct. This program includes what we in the West

normally consider religious life, but also the full range of social relationships, business ethics, and, most significantly for our discussion, political life and political structures. Very quickly, this comprehensive vision was codified into a legal system, known as the Shari'a, and it is so detailed that mastery is a life-long task. It is the Shari'a that provides the context for Islam as a political force.[5]

Some years ago I attended a lecture given by a leading North African Muslim cleric to a group of university students in the United States. He naturally chose the Law as his topic. The address was given through a translator. As he concluded, he opened the session to a few questions, and the first came from a young co-ed who asked him, "Don't you know that you can't legislate morality?" The question was translated, and the cleric looked perturbed and asked for the question to be repeated. The process was repeated, at which time the cleric became angry, pounded his fist to the lecture stand, and shouted in Arabic, "I will not do this again without a competent translator." The concepts that a society could have morality without law, that the law could or should be based on anything but divine revelation, and that the law could function without political enforcement were so foreign, so inconceivable, that he assumed a faulty translation.

The missionary vision of Islam includes the eventual personal conversion of individuals, but begins with the establishment of "God's reign on the earth." This can only be accomplished under a Muslim ruler who accepts the advice and direction of Islamic religious and legal experts. In all times and places, political structures are established and maintained through force. Violence is endemic to Islam, but not because Muslim people are more violent by nature; in general they are not. It is not so because Muslim people are more "fanatical" or "fundamentalist." Nor is it so because Muslims are more irrational or driven by passions. It is so because Islam, by its very nature, involves the reordering of human political structures and institutions. And at all times and places, such reordering has and will require the use of force. At a critical moment in his life, Jesus looked into the eyes of Pilate and stated, "My kingdom is not of this world." Muhammed never made such a statement.

The Model of the Prophet

There is a second and closely related reason for the tendency towards the use of force and violence within Islam: the model of the Prophet. It is difficult to exaggerate the influence of Muhammed's life on Muslims. While Muslim theology has consistently held to the full humanity of Muhammed, he is nonetheless understood to be the very model of true humanity, the ideal person God chose as the vehicle for His final and complete revelation to all of humankind. Muhammed is human, not divine. But he is the perfect human. Muslims all over the globe grow up reading and memorizing the sayings and deeds of the Prophet. And they rely on this "Sunnah" to shape and direct their lives. It is difficult to enter into an extended discussion with a pious Muslim on any topic, from religion to car repair, and not hear the Prophet quoted repeatedly.[6]

As the founder of the faith, Muhammed has a three-fold title: Prophet, Warrior, and Statesman. As Prophet, he received the message of God for the "new world order." As warrior, he employed what force was necessary to make that message a reality. As statesman, he developed the political systems and structures necessary to main-

tain the message. Muhammed was twice wounded in battle and was at the forefront when the Muslim army made their final conquests of the Arabian people. In general, Muslims take this aspect of the prophet very seriously.

I was once involved in an interfaith dialogue with a number of Muslim leaders. One seemed particularly obsessed with the Crusades and went on and on about the savagery and brutality of the "Christian" armies. I finally had heard enough and responded that while the Crusades were terrible, it was not as if Muslims had not swung a sword or two as well. In all seriousness, he looked across the table from me and said, "That is true, but Jesus told you not to." He was right; Jesus did tell me not to. And Muhammed, by his teachings and his deeds, not only employed violence, but also fully validated it as a means to achieve the religious vision that is Islam.

The Context for Violence

Bin Laden, as well as the Saudi, Egyptian, Indonesian, and other Muslim participants in the attacks on New York, Washington, and Bali represent the most violent and extreme aspects of a broad and popular movement in the Islamic world. For better or worse, this movement has come to be termed "Islamic Fundamentalism." While it is true that only a small percentage of Muslims have or will condone the attacks of September 11 or October 12, a substantial percentage of Muslims would support the goals—they would fully understand the reasoning behind such extreme action. Understanding why this would be so requires some historical context.

Beginning in the late seventh century, Muslims began to spread across much of the globe and soon established the most

powerful and successful empire in human history. And for almost nine hundred years they dominated the world. Islamic civilization was the most militarily powerful, economically successful, and culturally creative that the world had seen. Everything seemed to be going as planned, and God clearly seemed to be on their side. Then, beginning around 1750, everything began to fall apart. By 1915, virtually the whole Islamic world had been overrun by Western Christian imperialists, and the Islamic world was in stunned disarray.

The response of the vast majority of ruling elites was to become as much like the West as possible, to emulate the colonial masters in order to be free of them. They remained Muslim, but adapted to the modern, that is Western, world. By the mid twentieth century, Western colonial rule began to come to an end. Independent nation states were formed, with the promise of a brighter future. But the promise soon faded, and the lives of most Muslim people did not improve.

Beginning about 1950, first in Egypt and Pakistan then spreading quickly, a new response to Muslim failure and humiliation came to the fore. It was not that the Christian West was superior, but rather the West was evil. And Muslims had fallen prey to the evil ones because they had abandoned their faith and religious practice. In words that might be familiar to some, they had turned their back on God, and God had lifted his protective veil. To once again take their rightful place in the world, Muslims must rid themselves of the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious oppression of the Christian West and establish an Islamic system for all of society. Such a goal can only be achieved through a combination of religious revival and drastic political change.

And drastic political change rarely comes without violence.

In the early stages of the Fundamentalist movement, almost all the violence was directed at "corrupt" regimes within the Islamic world.[7] Several events, spaced over a number of years, have redirected the violence toward what is now perceived as the true source of Muslim distress: the 1967 war in which Israel took control of the holy city of Jerusalem and began the military occupation of the Palestinian people, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the entry of the United States military into that civil war, and the first Gulf War and subsequent stationing of "infidel" troops in the Muslim holy land of the Arabian Peninsula.[8] These events, coupled with unwavering support of Israel, have placed the United States as target number one in the "battle for Islam."

Martyrdom Operations

While the religious affirmation of violence and the political and economic depression of Muslims may help explain attacks against Western targets, something more needs to be said regarding the nature of these attacks. Suicide attacks aimed at non-combatants are a new development within Islam. Suicide has no support in the scared literature, nor has it historical precedent. There is no tradition of honorable suicide in Islam, and Islamic history offers no positive models of suicide. The martyr is highly valued and promised great reward in heaven, but up to very recently, the martyr was one who fell in battle against an armed enemy. Likewise, the Qur'an clearly precludes any attack on innocent women and children. Muslim armies have been no more no less humane than other armies, but assault on innocent non-combatants has never been validated

as "Islamic." Suicide attacks[9] like those occurring in Israel, Russia, Kenya, Indonesia, and the United States are something new, in a religious tradition that generally abhors innovation.

The explanation for this innovation lies in the profound sense of humiliation, despair, and powerlessness that dominates the world of Muslim extremists. Because of this profound sense of loss, and the overwhelming economic, military, and strategic superiority of the enemy, some within the radical Islamic movement have opened themselves to new interpretations of the sacred literature. Because of the awesome power of the enemy, any and all methods of fighting are justified. From their perspective, the Christian West and their proxy Israel have declared total war on Islam and Muslim people.[10] And in total war, there are no "innocent" civilians. For many extremist Muslims, "martyrdom operations" are the one method of overcoming despair by striking a meaningful blow for Islam. They are of low cost to the Muslim community and inflict great harm on the enemy. And the self-sacrifice implicit in such actions inspires others and builds a spirit of optimism at a time when there is very little reason to be optimistic.

Clearly the most problematic aspect of "martyrdom operations" is that they kill, and even target, civilians. That fact alone should invalidate these operations. In fact, many religious authorities in the Muslim world have issued rulings against these types of operations.[11] However, in the eyes of most Muslim radicals, the official religious bodies no longer carry the moral authority of Islam. They are generally viewed as corrupted and under the control of evil political rulers. This attitude has generally freed up the extremists to come to their own interpretations and judgments.[12]

47

The Future

There seems little doubt that Islamic violence against the West will continue into the new century. Israel has been and will continue to be the primary source of Muslim angst and humiliation. The American and allied occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq will provoke even greater hatred for the West, enhance the already strong sense of victimization among radical Muslims, and, more than likely, increase their numbers. The official Islamic establishment, which is considerably more moderate throughout the entire world, appears to be in no position to influence the extremists—let alone control them. However, that is where hope for the future lies. At some point, the legitimate Islamic leadership must lead ordinary Muslims to see that these radical interpretations of the Jihad tradition are not only non-Islamic, but also ultimately destructive to the moral fiber of the Muslim community. But I fear many more will die before that day dawns.

ENDNOTES

[1] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[2] For an alternate answer to that question, see Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). In this work, Lawrence makes a case for Islam as a complex international religious system that cannot be reduced to simple stereotypes or generalizations.

[3] "Striving for Islam" and "striving in the path of God" are common euphemisms for engaging in armed combat to achieve Islamic goals.

[4] All Quranic quotations taken from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: MacMillian, 1955).

[5] See Daniel Pipes, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 10-13.

[6] As a Christian, I have often been troubled by the comparison between our traditions in this regard. We hold a much higher view of Jesus as the Son of God. Yet, though one is unlikely to hear a sermon that does not reference Jesus, it is quite easy to go weeks, even months without hearing Jesus quoted.

[7] It is perhaps important to note here that in almost all cases, Islamicist movements were first the subjects of state violence and took up violence themselves in response.

[8] It is difficult to overstate how this act has angered and humiliated those on the extreme edge of the Islamicist movement. It is roughly akin to some Muslim nation stationing troops in Vatican City. To add to the insult, there are female troops driving tanks, in a country that does not allow women to drive automobiles.

[9] Muslims know these attacks as "Martyrdom Operations."

[10] It should be noted that this understanding is not drawn from thin air. While we in the West are made constantly aware of Israeli casualties from these types of attacks, the body count is at least three to one, with three times as many Palestinian civilians dying at the hands of Israeli occupation forces.

[11] The Sheik of Al Azhar University in Cairo, the closest thing to an Islamic Pope, categorically rejected suicide operations some years ago. Others have been slower to respond. However, when the operations strike home, action is taken. After the attacks on Saudi soil, the Saudi government acted to "re-educate" all the clergy, demanding they teach

against suicide operations as un-Islamic and dismissing any who failed to do so. In 2002 Indonesia was struck by attacks that have had a very serious negative impact on the economy. The Indonesian Council of Ulemas issued a binding decree in December of 2003, citing any form of terrorism as unacceptable under any definition of Jihad and falling outside the teaching of the Qur'an.

[12]In general, the contemporary radical Islamic movement is a lay-led affair. Most of the leading thinkers are not theologically trained. Though bin Laden lays claim to the title of "Sheik," he is in fact a very successful hardware salesman.