
Jihad and Islamic History

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On September 11, 2001, I was teaching at a small college in New York State. Like many people around the country, I immediately reached out to my Muslim neighbors, fearful of vigilante attacks. My colleague, Salahuddin Muhammad, the Imam (prayer leader) of a small mosque in Newburgh, New York, assured me he and his congregation were fine, but he also told me that some members were worried enough to change the name of their mosque, called “Masjid al-Jihad al-Akbar” or the “Mosque of the Greater Jihad.” He understood their concern, but initially refused, insisting on using misconceptions about the word jihad as a chance to teach others about Islam.

Like many religious terms, jihad has a whole array of meanings all centered on the root concept of struggle. The “greater jihad” is understood as the *jihad al-nafs*, or the struggle with one’s own evil inclinations, and it is based on a story that goes back to the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. It seems that Muhammad was returning to his home after a significant campaign, where the Muslim forces had prevailed. But instead of giving a victory speech to his followers, he said: “Now we have returned from the lesser jihad in order to take up the greater jihad,” in essence, devaluing the whole place of warfare in the Islamic tradition.¹

This is just one of many stories that portray Muhammad as a peaceful, deeply spiritual person, one who was quite reluctant to take up the ways of warfare. In naming their mosque after the Greater Jihad, the Muslims of Newburgh were not menacing their neighbors with the threat of war, but rather exhorting their fellow Muslims to devote themselves more fully to God, pray five times daily and come together at noon prayers on Fridays. They were evoking a sense of Islamic history quite different from the one that extremists like Osama bin Laden imagine in their calls to “kill Americans everywhere.”

The six years since 9/11 have witnessed many changes in the world. As a patriot, I weep as I watch my country sink deeper into the morass of an unjustified and unwinnable war. The reputation of my country has been permanently damaged by our new policies of torture and extraordinary rendition, and our blatant disregard for the lives of American soldiers and Iraqi citizens alike. As an educator, I see young people growing increasingly skeptical of their government, convinced either that all Muslims are potential terrorists, bent on destroying the United States, or that the whole system of government is corrupt. My job is to keep them from both these extremes, and to teach them to see knowledge as a tool to move beyond sound bites.

I wrote this essay because I am convinced that the only way to understand the debate over the meaning of jihad is to explore Islamic history for ourselves. Such a task involves far more than recounting a series of places, names, and dates, though these are important too; it also means understanding the ways that religions construct history to make their authoritative statements. These are difficult tasks, but note that I am making a distinction between: (1) history as a discrete set of events that happened in the past; and (2) the meaning of those events for religious traditions. For religious people, there can be no dispassionate or objective retelling of certain facts and events; rather those events are both descriptive of God's involvement in the world and also prescriptive of correct human action. Religious history therefore takes events and constructs meaning out of them in a dynamic dialogue between past events and present concerns.²

Further, the recording and rehearsing of past events is one of the most important jobs of the religious adherent. By remembering and retelling the originating stories, they claim sacred history for themselves and are actively involved in its reconstruction. This retelling may be an actual reading of history, but it can also be found in rituals that put the believer back at that very moment in time when God was most closely involved in human events. For Christians, approaching the table for communion re-enacts the Last Supper when Jesus foretold his death and commanded his disciples, saying: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). For Jews, eating unleavened bread during the Passover meal is a similar reminder of God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. What is at issue here is not the historical fact of the matter, but rather the meaning of those facts for these religions.³

In this essay, I analyze four constructions of the "lesser jihad," that is jihad as warfare. The classical positions I describe first (those of legal scholars and historians) dominate the Islamic tradition even today, and many modern jurists and historians would give much the same account as that of their medieval counterparts;⁴ as one example of such a modern jurist, I have chosen Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). But in some ways the point of this essay is to provide a context for understanding extremist voices, such as that of Osama bin Laden. As I hope to demonstrate, extremists like bin Laden are marked by their rejection of the pluralism embedded in the Islamic tradition. They argue that their version of history is the only one that preserves the heart of the tradition. As a result, they must be both highly selective in representing this tradition and also intolerant of contrary voices. To my mind, it is this intolerance that identifies them as extremists, purposefully living on the edge of a tradition that loves discussion and disagreement.⁵

Beginnings

The basic stuff of Islamic history has become widely known: a charismatic Prophet appears in Arabia in the seventh century, preaches a monotheistic faith and builds the initial Muslim community; his revelations from God are then collected in the Qur'an. The meaning of these events was obvious to those who experienced them. For the following generations, conquests and building of the empires occupied their time and prevented serious reflection on these

events. It was only 200 years later, when scholars faced a broad, diverse Muslim community, that the construction of history began in earnest as a way of reconciling the present with the exemplary past. Surprisingly, Muslim historians achieved this reconciliation by developing an almost postmodern view of the past: preserving multiple perspectives on key events; presenting them side-by-side; and proclaiming that God alone could know the truth of the matter.

This method of writing history was mirrored in similar methods for extracting legal and ethical action from the Qur'an; the commonest method became known as the doctrine of abrogation. The great legal scholar Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 820) summarized his method of abrogation when addressing the question of the prayer direction. In al-Shafi'i's day all Muslims prayed facing Mecca, just as they do today, but in the earliest community, they prayed facing Jerusalem. Al-Shafi'i writes:

God [initially] turned his messenger to the direction of the holy temple [of Jerusalem] in prayer. This was the direction of prayer, and it was not permitted to turn in any other direction before its abrogation. But then God abrogated prayer in the direction of the holy temple and turned [Muhammad] in the direction of the House [in Mecca]. Then it was no longer permitted, as written, to turn in the direction of the holy temple, nor was it permitted to turn to any other direction than that of the Sacred House . . . The same applies every time God has abrogated, for the meaning of "abrogate" is to abandon His command. It was right in its time, but its abandonment is right, too, since God abrogated it. (al-Shafi'i 1979: 121-2)

In this text al-Shafi'i tries to explain how two subsequent commands from God can each be right in their own time. By using the sequencing of history, al-Shafi'i is able to organize verses and dismiss false interpretations. For example, the Qur'an commands believers "do not come to prayer when you are drunk" (4:46), which seems to suggest a tolerance of moderate drinking. However, another verse contains a more complete prohibition of wine (Qur'an 5:93), and legal scholars understood 5:93 to have been revealed after 4:46, thereby abrogating it. The first verse remains in the Qur'an and is still considered revelation from God, a part of His holy Qur'an. By emphasizing this doctrine of abrogation, Muslim jurists recognize the diversity of God's commands while organizing them to the benefit of the community.

As important as it is as a source for correct human actions, such as jihad, the Qur'an contains only some 600 verses that have direct legal import. Therefore scholars must consult other sources, such as Muhammad's Sunna or his general "way of doing things." The Prophet's words and deeds were preserved and passed on from generation to generation in a form of oral transmission known as hadith. The Arabic word hadith means "narrative," and a typical hadith begins with a list of those from whom the story was received, going back in time to the Prophet. Following this list is the story itself, often an account of the Prophet's actions in a particular situation or the Prophet's advice on a certain problem. The list of transmitters is an integral part of the hadith and connects the story to an authoritative history of scholarship.

The need to organize contradictory hadith was even greater than for verses of the Qur'an,

since hadith continued to be collected, and in some cases created, until long after the Prophet's death. When the Prophet's Sunna seems to contradict the Qur'an, their relationship must be clarified. The difficulty of this task was also recognized by al-Shafi'i, who flatly denies that any such contradiction is possible:

[The Prophet] never says anything except by a judgment from God . . . Were it permissible for it to be said that the Messenger of God laid down a Sunna and then abrogated his Sunna by the Qur'an . . . it would also be permissible for it to be said that the cutting off of the hand of the thief should not be dropped even if the stolen article were kept securely or if its value were less than a quarter dinar. (al-Shafi'i 1979: 111-12)

What al-Shafi'i is referring to is the fact that an important Prophetic Sunna clarified, but did not contradict, the stark command of the Qur'an to cut off the hand of a thief. In actual practice, the punishment for theft was never administered unless the value of the stolen goods exceeded one-quarter of a gold dinar and the item could not be recovered. But if one simply read the Qur'an literally, without this historical context, then even stealing a loaf of bread could be cause for amputation.

Here the history of the early community is cited to guide interpretation, but al-Shafi'i appeals to more than simple chronology. Rather, the role of the Prophet as bearer of the revelation is invoked. As God's chosen Prophet, he knew best what was meant by the Qur'anic text, so in some cases, his interpretations are taken as more authoritative than the apparent meaning of the Qur'an. How one remembers the history of that Prophetic moment, those 22 years of revelation and the early community of Muslims, is key to identifying and interpreting sacred text in Islam.

As influential as it was, not everyone accepted al-Shafi'i's construction of history, but most everyone seemed to agree that it is not possible simply to extract meaning from the Qur'an directly. Rather that text must be read within several historical constructs: the correct order of the revealed verses; the interpretive words of the Prophet and his companions; and the practice of the Muslim community. With these tools of history and abrogation in hand, we can now turn to classical and modern views of the lesser jihad. The classical genres of legal and historical writings each stake a claim to authority, and in those different constructs of jihad we will see the effects of different rememberings of history.

Classical Views

As we think back to the American Revolution, it is hard for us to imagine anyone fighting that sort of war. Two hundred years ago, British navies fired guns on our port cities, and their armies marched across our fields and forests. Both sides commandeered supplies from local farmers and most every family had someone fighting in the war, on one side or the other. Today we are comparatively distant from war; most of us could hardly handle a combat rifle, much less fly a B-2 bomber. The same must have been true for our legal scholar al-Shafi'i (d. 820) as he struggled to make sense out of the prescriptions for war in the Qur'an, written almost 200 years before his time.

Al-Shafi'i wrote his books from within a rich and stable Islamic empire, one whose enemies remained hundreds and even thousands of miles from the capital in Baghdad. Professional armies fought campaigns from year to year, but so meager was the popular interest in these campaigns that the government had to hire mercenaries and slaves to fill the ranks. Trade flourished (coins from this period have been found as far away as Scandinavia), schools and hospitals were built, and increasing numbers of people devoted themselves to the study of philosophy, theology, and the sources of religious law.

Part of al-Shafi'i's problem was how to square these new realities with the history of warfare in the Qur'anic period. Clearly the Qur'an could not be irrelevant, since God states directly: "We have sent down to you the Book as a clarification for everything and as a guidance and a mercy" (Qur'an 16:91). But then how was it relevant? Al-Shafi'i begins his discussion by quoting the theological basis for warfare in the Qur'an:

God has imposed the duty of jihad as laid down in His book and uttered by His Prophet's tongue. He stressed the calling of the jihad as follows: "God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise. They fight in the way of God; they kill, and are killed; that is a promise binding upon God in the Torah and Gospel and the Qur'an; and who fulfils his covenant better than God? So rejoice in the bargain you have made with Him." (al-Shafi'i 1979: 82-3; the quotation from the Qur'an is *Sura* 9:112)

It is instructive to note that the Qur'an sees this duty of war as continuous with that imposed by God on Christians and Jews. Al-Shafi'i continues to quote several other verses from the Qur'an along with statements from the Prophet that seem to suggest, however, that taking part in war is required of all able-bodied believers at all times, just as with other religious duties such as the giving of alms or the performance of prayer. He even admits that, "the literal meaning of this communication is that the duty is obligatory on all men (*rijal*)" (al-Shafi'i 1979: 84). But in al-Shafi'i's understanding, the literal meaning, taken out of historical context, does not yield an accurate interpretation. Using other Qur'an verses, as well as Prophetic example, he demonstrates that jihad was not imposed on everyone at all times even during the Prophet's lifetime.

God said [in the Qur'an]: "It is not for the believers to go forth all together, but why should not a part of every section of them go forth . . ." [Qur'an 9:123]. [Al-Shafi'i explained:] When the Apostle went to battle he was accompanied by some of his companions while others stayed at home; for Ali b. Abi Talib stayed at home during the battle of Tabuk. Nor did God ordain that all Muslims were under obligation to go to battle, for He said: "Why should not a part of every section of them go forth?" So He made it known that going into battle was obligatory on some, but not all, just as knowledge of the law is not obligatory on all but on some . . . If some go forth [into battle], so that a sufficient number fulfils the collective duty, the others do not fall into error. (al-Shafi'i 1979: 85-6)

As we will see below, this distinction between a “collective duty” and an “individual duty” will be completely reversed by Osama bin Laden, but what I find important here is the construction of a historical narrative to interpret texts and the fact that a “literal” reading may be misleading.

Al-Shafi’i’s concern to make sense out of Qur’anic commands was not widely shared in the classical period. Legal texts by other authors were far less concerned with the Qur’an, taking instead the practice of the community as the primary issue. In most every legal text, one chapter is devoted to jihad, usually clustered with chapters on funerals, oaths, and international relations. It is rarely connected to the chapters on the duties of faith: prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, and charity. The *Muwatta’* of Malik b. Anas (d. 795), for example, cites very few verses from the Qur’an and has only a short section on issues of going to war. Even the question of how to wage war receives little space, though Malik does cite a statement of Abu Bakr (d. 634): “I advise you ten things: Do not kill women or children or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly” (Malik b. Anas 1951: 448). The vast majority of Malik’s chapter is devoted to what to do after war: how to bury the dead, how to divide the spoils of war, and how to treat the conquered peoples. In this text, emphasis is much more on practical rules, not on jihad as a religious duty.

In a sense, both al-Shafi’i and Malik were addressing the same problem. While the sacred history of the early community has an undeniable religious authority, it is hard to gain clear rules from a period marked by so much change. Whereas al-Shafi’i attempts to deal with this by developing logical rules of order and primacy, Malik simply pays more attention to the pragmatic needs of the community. Another way of resolving the issue, however, is to homogenize the history itself, and cite those events that fit a narrative of salvation. The author of one of the grandest of narratives was Abu Ja’far al-Tabari (d. 923).⁶

While there is no single, official history of Islam, al-Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings* is one of the most highly regarded accounts. He begins not with the birth of Muhammad, but with the creation of the world, demonstrating God’s active involvement in every moment. Only after 1,000 pages of history is Muhammad’s birth recorded, and his early life is filled with signs of his coming mission. In one of these stories, two angels come and place him on a scale, weighing him against ten, then one hundred, then one thousand of his people, but Muhammad outweighs them all. His breast is then opened and his heart removed; al-Tabari purports to record Muhammad’s own account of this event:

He opened my heart, and took out from it the pollution of Satan and the clot of blood, and threw them away. Then one said to the other, “Wash his breast as you would a receptacle – or, wash his heart as you would a covering.” [. . .] Then they sewed up my breast and placed the seal between my shoulders. No sooner had they done this than they turned away from me. While this was happening I was watching it as though I were a bystander. (in Rosenthal 1988: 75)

This spiritual cleansing is just one of the many such stories that al-Tabari cites in order to emphasize God's special favor toward his chosen Prophet. Al-Tabari then recounts the Prophet's trials in his hometown of Mecca, recalling incident after incident of persecution by the Meccan polytheists. This persecution eventually forced Muhammad and his followers to flee Mecca for Medina, where the clans of the Khazraj tribe willingly protected him and his community. Al-Tabari records this account of their pledge, as one of their leaders addressed them:

"People of the Khazraj, do you know what you are pledging yourselves to in swearing allegiance to this man?" "Yes," they said. He continued, "In swearing allegiance to him you are pledging yourselves to wage war against all mankind. If you think that when your wealth is exhausted by misfortune and your nobles are depleted by death you will give him up, then stop now, for, by God, it is disgrace in this world and the next if you later give him up. But if you think that you will be faithful to the promises which you made in inviting him, even if your wealth is exhausted and your nobles killed, then take him, for, by God, he is the best thing for you in this world and the next." They answered, "We shall take him even if it brings the loss of our wealth and the killing of our nobles. What shall we gain for this, O Messenger of God, if we are faithful?" He answered, "Paradise." (Rosenthal: 134)

Thus, with prophecy and apocalyptic references, al-Tabari lays the foundation for a singular interpretation of this history. In contrast, several verses in the Qur'an suggest that Muhammad's early followers were much more equivocal about the prospects of war. For example, the Qur'an states: "Fighting is prescribed for you, though it be hateful to you. Yet it may be that you will hate a thing that is better for you, just as you may love a thing that is worse for you" (Qur'an 2:215). Other Qur'an verses speak of the many Muslims who preferred staying at home to fighting. Even al-Tabari records a variant version of this pledge in which paradise is gained by the following terms: "that we should not associate anything with God, should not steal, should not commit adultery, should not kill our children, should not produce any lie . . . and should not disobey [Muhammad] in what was proper." Warfare does not appear at all in this pledge, but al-Tabari dates it to the previous year, claiming that it was superceded (Rosenthal: 127).

Classical Islamic texts therefore offer at least two competing narratives about jihad and Islamic history. In the legal texts, jihad is seen as a limited venture that need concern only one part of the community. Just as the community as a whole must support and train religious scholars, so also the community must see that there is a sufficient army available to defend Islamic territory; in no way does the duty of jihad approach the duties of prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, or charity so far as the individual Muslim is concerned. In contrast, many history texts glorify the role of jihad in the early community. More than simply a series of local skirmishes, these early battles are seen as signs of God's direct guidance of his community. Both sorts of text depend on the same set of events, but they each construct a historical narrative that

responds to issues of contemporary importance. For the legal scholars, a pragmatic approach was taken; the apocalyptic nature of war in the early community was clearly irrelevant and warfare needed to be routinized into a functioning government. For historians, emphasis on a glorious past was a way of making up for an overall decline in the empire, and the re-telling of the sacred history could itself be a pious act.

Modern Responses

Medieval manipulation of historical events lays the groundwork for understanding modern interpretations. Today, in a manner quite similar to al-Tabari and al-Shafi'i, reformers, feminists, and militant extremists all turn to the early history of Islam to support their interpretations. The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi has written about this process with extraordinary clarity:

Delving into memory, slipping into the past, is an activity that these days is closely supervised . . . The act of recollecting, like acts of black magic, really only has an effect on the present. And this works through strict manipulation of its opposite—the time of the dead, of those who are absent, the silent time that could tell us everything. (Mernissi 1991: 9-10)

In her study, Mernissi returns to the classical history texts, mining them for new information and making them respond to modern concerns. In this process, Mernissi discovers that

Ample historical evidence portrays women in the Prophet's Medina raising their heads from slavery and violence to claim their right to join, as equal participants, in the making of their Arab history . . . Muslims can take pride that . . . women enjoyed the right to enter into the councils of the Muslim *umma* [community], to speak freely to its Prophet-leader, to dispute with the men, to fight for their happiness, and to be involved in the management of military and political affairs. The evidence is there in the works of religious history [of the women] who built Muslim society side by side with their male counterparts. (El Hibri 1999: viii)

Some may find Mernissi's reading to be surprising, even misleading.⁷ Islam, she claims, is not a religion built on violence and war, but rather a revolutionary set of beliefs that supported equality for women and democratic change while women in the rest of the world were still suffering in virtual slavery. This notion of Islam as a revolutionary movement has its roots in apocalyptic texts, and resonates with other voices from the modern world, both reformist and traditionalist, but it would be misleading to suggest that their interpretive strategies are identical. Whereas Mernissi and the reformers are challenging elitist control of the tradition, and opening up new interpretive possibilities, traditionalist extremists like Osama bin Laden are closing down and restricting interpretation. Reformers find both inspiration and variety of opinion in the medieval texts; extremists find only their own perceptions.

There is perhaps no clearer counter-example to Osama bin Laden than Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), one of the most important figures in recent Islamic history. Respected by both secular and religious authorities, Abduh transcended many of the divisions in Egyptian society of the late nineteenth century. As Grand Mufti of Egypt, Abduh held a position of power with the monarchy and with the British government. He used that power to help reform al-Azhar into a modern religious university, and he was instrumental in laying the foundations for Cairo University as a secular institution.

Abduh's book, *The Theology of Unity*, is another version of sacred history, but his starting point is neither the birth of the Prophet nor the creation of the world. Rather, he begins with a rational defense for the existence of God. Using the language of Muslim philosophers before him, he discusses God's attributes and his essence and sees God as the "originating cause" of all creation, the only being who is not contingent on some other cause but is himself "necessarily existing" (Abduh 1964: 44). By beginning in this way, Abduh seeks to portray Islam as a thoroughly rational religion.

Abduh freely admits the fact of warfare during the Prophet's lifetime, but emphasizes God's purposes in this warfare over human involvement.

Like other religions, Islam began with its message. But it encountered a quite unprecedented enmity on the part of those who in their perversity oppressed the truth. No prophet had such antagonism or faced such humiliation as Muhammad . . . The different religious sects inhabiting the Arabian peninsula and neighboring areas joined forces against Islam to root it out and strangle its message. It was a case of the strong against the weak, the wealthy against the poor. Islam in its steadfast self-defence had nothing to rely on save its inherent truth, pitted against error and the light of its guidance in the darkness of falsehood, to bring it to victory . . .

They waged war against the superior enemy and overcame them, for all their vast numbers, strength and advanced equipment. When the distresses of war were spent and sovereignty passed to the victor, Islam treated the vanquished with kindly gentleness, allowed them to maintain their religions and their rites in security and peace. They gave them protection and safeguarded their possessions, as they did their own people and their property, levying for this service a slight tax on their incomes according to stipulated rates. (Abduh 1964: 142-3)

Abduh uses much the same set of facts as does al-Tabari. But al-Tabari portrays the ill treatment of the Prophet as a crime that deserved to be punished. The view of war espoused by the Khazraj tribe is one of apocalyptic fury that might well never end. In contrast, Abduh sees the Prophet as an innocent, persecuted for simply preaching the truth. The early battles and the wars of conquest were only undertaken in self-defense, and against great odds. Victory was neither sought nor desired, but when it was thrust on the Muslims, they ruled in justice. This account of history fits into Abduh's overall claim for Islam as the most rational and most socially just of religions. After detailing the ways Islam removes racial and economic

differences, he states:

There is no important aspect of good conduct in which [Islam] has not brought a new lease of life – nothing essential to the social fabric it has failed to enjoin. As we have shown, it brings together for mature man, freedom of thought, intellectual independence of action, and thus integrity of character, enhancement of capacity and a general quickening of intention and achievement. Whoever reads the Qur'an rightly will find new impulse and initiative and unfailing treasure. (Abduh 1964: 140)

As different as Abduh's portrayal is from that of al-Tabari, they both place jihad into the past, seeing this sort of God-ordained warfare as something belonging to a specific historical moment in sacred history. Speaking from within a state controlled by the British government, Abduh is simply appealing for the right of self-determination, not calling for another revolutionary war.

After Abduh's death, however, British and French control over the Middle East only increased. In response, the Ottoman Empire allied itself with the Axis forces of Italy and Germany in World War I. The results of that alliance were disastrous for the region, and the Empire was forcibly split into British and French spheres of influence. Egypt did not win full independence until the officers' revolution of 1952 that put Gamal Abd al-Nasir into power, and Algeria did not win independence from France until the bloody wars of independence in the 1960s. Nearly every Islamic nation in the world was born in the twentieth century out of some colonialist history, and many had pro-Western governments installed and maintained by Europe and the United States.

Part of this colonialist legacy can be seen in the legal institutions of these new nations, most of which have been borrowed from Britain, France, and other European countries. Calls for a "return to Islamic law" may sometimes be seen, therefore, as calls for local control over history and for self-determination. Such legitimate concerns are exploited by revolutionary extremists, like Osama bin Laden, who tap into popular discontent with military autocracy.

We know much more about bin Laden's thought in recent years, due to some excellent scholarship;⁸ much insight can be gained, for example, from a 1998 declaration that he made along with other radical leaders.⁹ That declaration is important for several reasons, notably its claim that the killing of Americans is an "individual duty," incumbent on each and every Muslim. As al-Shafi'i noted earlier, such a claim goes against both the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet, which define jihad as a duty on the collective community. By making jihad an individual duty, bin Laden is leaving conventional interpretations and condoning individual terrorist acts.

Further, bin Laden cloaks these new interpretations in a unique reading of Islamic history, one that both portrays the Prophet as a single-minded warrior and also describes the current situation in apocalyptic terms. By comparing bin Laden's readings with those of the traditional sources, we can understand the extremist nature of his rhetoric. For example, the declaration begins in good Islamic fashion with invocations of God and the Prophet:

Praise be to God, who revealed the Book, controls the clouds, defeats factionalism, and

says in His Book: "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war)"; and peace be upon our Prophet, Muhammad Bin-'Abdallah, who said: "I have been sent with the sword between my hands to ensure that no one but God is worshipped, God who put my livelihood under the shadow of my spear and who inflicts humiliation and scorn on those who disobey my orders."

In this short passage, the whole history of Islam is being manipulated in obvious, and also some less obvious, ways. War is portrayed as God's preferred means of spreading monotheistic beliefs, and that fighting is encouraged with citation of specific means. The war and the warlike stance are to be maintained until the whole world is subdued. Further, the Prophet is portrayed as conceiving his mission and indeed his whole livelihood in similar terms, with God actively supporting his every move. Missing, of course, are quotations from the Qur'an urging believers to incline toward peace (such as 8:61: "If they incline to peace, you should too!"), and the Prophet's preoccupation with peace treaties, state-building, and equitable treatment of both Muslim and non-Muslim.¹⁰

Far subtler is the manipulation of the Arabic sources. First, the translation consistently chooses the most warlike interpretations of the Arabic: "fight and slay" is chosen over the more accurate "fight" and "pagan" is chosen over "polytheist." The latter choice is important, since this verse refers explicitly to the polytheistic Meccans, and not to non-Muslims in general. Further, the verse is cut off in the Arabic text, before its important concluding section: "but if they repent, perform the prayer and pay alms, then let them go their way; surely God is most-forgiving and compassionate" (Qur'an 9:5).

The hadith of the Prophet is even more problematic. First, this hadith is unknown in the great medieval collections. The most important collection (Bukhari) only records the second half of the hadith, which reads quite differently when translated alone and more accurately: "My livelihood was placed under the shadow of my spear, and humiliation and scorn have been placed on those who oppose my orders." (Ibn Hajar, 1986: 6:115) Even this hadith is questionable according to the standards set by medieval scholars, since the last transmitter before Bukhari (Abu Munib al-Jurashi) is unknown.¹¹ If we also disregard the classical sources, the English is still misleading; a better translation of the Arabic would be: "I have been sent with the sword while the hour is upon me, until God alone is worshipped."

The apocalyptic reference here to the Hour of God's Judgment is mirrored in the next paragraph of bin Laden's declaration, which describes the American presence on Saudi Arabian soil as "crusader armies spreading in it like locusts, taking over its land, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations." After a list of American crimes, the declaration culminates in an appeal to drive these armies from Muslim lands and to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and the Ka'ba in Mecca.

Through this careful manipulation of sources, bin Laden is able to suggest, against all evidence to the contrary, that individual acts of terrorism can actually be seen as ways of rehearsing sacred history. Apparently, some of the 9/11 hijackers were influenced by just this

argument, as evidenced by a letter found with Muhammad Atta's belongings. This letter is striking in its use of religious devotional language, and the author seems to be convinced that his action was equivalent to those of the Prophet and his companions.¹² Of course, those actions were roundly condemned by all major Muslim authorities, both because of the wanton killing of innocent human beings and also because suicide is strictly prohibited in Islam.¹³

What Osama bin Laden demonstrates here is the power of that original sacred narrative to stir passions and foment social change. Were it not for the quotations of Qur'an and Prophetic hadith and the allusions to apocalyptic events, his call to "kill Americans everywhere" would come across as the ravings of a lunatic. But those quotations lend a substantial veneer of authority to his writings, so much so that many who have only a cursory knowledge of Islamic history have been fooled. This is, I would argue, precisely his purpose. By referring to sacred history in this manner, and by making donations to orphanages and other religious charities, bin Laden is making a claim on the heart of the Islamic tradition, attempting to present his extremist ideas as those of the mainstream.

Conclusion

It would be easy to conclude from this discussion that history does not matter, only its manipulation. After all, the same set of events seems to yield widely divergent interpretations: feminist versus militant; spiritual versus rational. Yet such a conclusion would be rash for two reasons. First, religious history does concern itself with real events that did, in fact, happen. Whatever interpretations may arise, they must always be in conversation with the evidence as preserved in manuscripts, archaeological sites, and other sources. We can use this evidence to identify bin Laden's construction of history as so extreme as to be nearly unrecognizable. Gone is the Prophet's distinction between the lesser and the greater jihad, and missing too are Abu Bakr's rules of engagement: "Do not kill women or children . . . Do not destroy an inhabited place." We can also compare the classical sources and criticize bin Laden's citation of Prophetic hadith, and complete his quotations from the Qur'an.

Second, interpretations do not happen in a vacuum but in the ongoing discussions of a community. For instance, martyrdom is an important subject for Islam, as it is for many other religious traditions, but bin Laden confuses suicide missions with martyrdom, a distinction that is clearly maintained in the classical sources.¹⁴ The larger Muslim community has responded to bin Laden's constructions of history by censuring him and denouncing attacks organized by Al Qaeda; in responding in this way, they are reasserting their construction of sacred history as the norm.

Modern Muslim interpreters of history all struggle to have their version accepted as defining the new norm. In so doing, they implicitly recognize the power of sacred history to transform and revolutionize the community, as well as to express the community's most profound hopes and desires. When we read the history of another religion, we are joining that process. The more we learn, the more complex our picture of that religion will become, and the better we can discern pious exhortations to join the "Greater Jihad" from devious attempts to describe the

killing of innocents as a religious act. Further, we can distinguish methods of interpretation that maintain an ongoing exploration of the classical sources from those that would purport to give us a singular definition of the truth. In these important ways, then, scholars of religion can take an activist stance, providing a useful analysis of religious movements while steering clear of both advocacy and cultural relativism.

It is interesting to note that despite all the fear of terrorism and of Muslims, Muslim immigration to the United States continues unabated. That mosque in Newburgh that I mentioned is growing, and the congregation has doubled in size since 2001. They have also, however, changed their name from the Mosque of the Greater Jihad to the Mosque of Ikhlas. Like jihad, *ikhlas* is a complex and important religious word; evoking the notions of faithfulness and devotion, it is the title of one of the most important chapters of the Qur'an. It seems to me that this move, from jihad to *ikhlas*, from struggle to faith, is a message of hope from that small congregation, a statement of their place, well woven into the fabric of American life.

Notes

- 1 Like many narratives of the Prophet, this one is laden with mythical elements and cannot be taken as historical fact; it is, however, a good reflection of a genuine tendency within the religious tradition.
- 2 In emphasizing the narrative elements of religious history, I am following a recent trend among scholars to respond to literary theorists. Like Andrew Greeley (1996), for example, I am intrigued by the imaginative and creative aspects of religious story telling, but I am not ready to ascribe so much power to the audience. Rather, like Richard Davis (1997), I find that historical facts, texts, and images can also play a corrective and creative role in this dialogue.
- 3 For those interested in a theoretical discussion of this dynamic of meaning, see Brockopp 2005.
- 4 For an overview, see Sohail Hashmi 2003.
- 5 See, for examples, Johansen 1999; Abou El Fadl 2001.
- 6 For a fascinating account of al-Tabari's approach to history, see Tayeb El Hibri 1999.
- 7 See, for example, Mohammed Fadel's 1997 article reviewing Mernissi and other modernist authors.
- 8 See, for example, the excellent collection of his writings, introduced by Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (Lawrence 2005). The statement discussed here appears in that collection on pages 58–62.
- 9 Published in the newspaper *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* (London) in Arabic; February 23, 1998.
- 10 Beyond the description of warfare as the lesser jihad, the sources record 27 peace treaties negotiated by the Prophet. Delegations were sent to all towns in advance of the conquering forces, and most major cities, such as Mecca, Jerusalem, and Alexandria, were taken with very little bloodshed. The Qur'an also makes many statements urging peaceful negotiations, such as "The good deed is not equal to the evil deed; repel [the evil deed] with one that is

better. And behold! The one against whom there was enmity will be as a loyal friend to you" (41:34). See also Qur'an 2:256, 5:32, 16:125, and 29:46.

- 11 See the discussion in Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani 1986 vol. 6: 115–16. Ibn Hajar notes that Ibn Hanbal does record a longer version which reads: "I have been sent with the sword while the hour is upon me, and my livelihood was placed under the shadow of my spear, and humiliation and scorn were placed on those who oppose my orders."
- 12 See the article in the *Washington Post*, September 28, 2001.
- 13 For a collection of some responses maintained by Omid Safi, see <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/response.htm>
- 14 See, for example, my essay on "The Good Death in Islamic Theology and Law" (Brockopp 2003) in *Islamic Ethics of Life*, 177–93.

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