

## Historical Background behind Bin Laden and the Taliban

If you would like to learn more about the historical background behind Bin Laden and the Taliban, and to what extent they are representative of Islam, then you'll be interested in the longish but extremely informative article below by Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry. For decades, he has served as a Christian missionary in Muslim countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. He has a PhD in Islamics, and is a former Dean of the School of World Mission and Professor of Islamic Studies at Fuller Seminary in California.

### The War on Terrorism: Reflections of a Guest in the Lands Involved

by J. Dudley Woodberry

My wife and I had just returned from Peshawar, Pakistan – the birthplace of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's main conduit to the world. In a service celebrating World Communion Sunday, we heard the news: bombs were falling in Afghanistan. As the round loaf of bread was broken, symbolizing Christ's broken body, I also thought of our broken world. As the cup was poured, commemorating his shed blood, I also thought of the blood being shed right then in Afghanistan, a land that had been our home. Each bomb landed in or near a place where we had been. Some craters were in the actual dirt where we had walked.

When we turned on our radio we heard a recording of Bin Laden calling on all Muslims to join a Holy War against the infidel West, especially Americans. Yet Muslims had been our hosts during our years of living in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, and our ministry had made us guests for shorter periods in most Muslim lands.

On our way back from Peshawar with other aid personnel who had been working with Afghans, we stopped in Thailand for a few days to see whether events might indicate the possibility of a return to Peshawar within a few weeks. As my wife and I walked the beach near a fishing village, we looked up and saw the crescent moon with dark storm clouds gathering around it and fishing boats with lights moving out into the darkness. That scene started my reflections on the peaceful and/or militant nature of Islam (symbolized by the crescent moon), on the reasons for the anger that is driving the dark storm clouds of terrorism, and on what the response of governments and especially Christians should be.

### Reflections on the Peaceful and/or Militant Nature of Islam

In the news, we have been bombarded by generalizations about the peacefulness or militancy of Islam or by the equating of fundamentalists (Islamists) and militants. All fail to grasp the diversity within Islam and its roots. The Qur'an is comprised of recitations by Muhammad, believed to come from God, to meet the needs that arose on specific occasions. Some were peaceful; others were militant. Therefore, either position can be argued for by selecting specific verses or illustrations from history.

The peaceful interpretation held by a majority of Muslims is based on verses like 2:256 ("There is no compulsion in religion") and 5:82 ("The nearest in affection to the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians.'"). The dhimmi classification, which applied to Jews and Christians in particular, gave them the right to practice their faith as long as they were loyal citizens and performed their obligations. In the Middle Ages Muslim governments were

commonly more tolerant of Jews and Christians than Christian governments were of Jews and Muslims.

The militants, however, base their position on Qur'anic verses like 2:216 ("Fighting is prescribed for you?"); 2:190-192 ("Fight in the cause of God those who fight you and slay them, for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter. Fight them until there is no more persecution and oppression and there prevails justice and faith in God."); 9:5 ("Fight and slay the infidels."), and 49:15 ("The true believers are those who strive with their lives for the cause of God."). Militants like Bin Laden use the words I have highlighted in their rationale: Fighting and slaying is prescribed by God. Americans cause oppression, injustice, are infidels (although the Qur'an is referring to polytheists); so Muslims must strive with their lives for the cause of God.

According to the canonical traditions, Muhammad taught that a martyr would have his sins forgiven, be shown his abode in Paradise, avoid purgatory, and receive the crown of honor (collection by Tirmidhi). The "suicide bombers" thus see themselves as performing a sacred obligation for God and his community and acquiring honor and an eternal reward. Furthermore, their experiences have led them to believe that they do not have diplomatic or military power to overcome God's enemies by any other means.

Another question that arises is how the rigid faith and practice of the Taliban fits into Islam. The Taliban have their historic roots in Hanbalism, the most fundamentalist of the four orthodox or orthoprax schools of Islam. By "fundamentalist" I mean that they go back to the fundamentals of their faith – the Qur'an and practice (Sunnah) of Muhammad and the earliest Muslims – and reject later adaptations. They hold that their understanding of the society of the earliest Muslims is the model for society even today, and it applies to all areas of life. Since there are plenty of peaceful and militant examples in Islam, these fundamentalists can be peaceful or militant. The Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia is a modern example of this Islamism – which was militant when the families of Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab were conquering most of Arabia and destroying popular saint veneration from the 18th century to the 20th century. Today, however, its expression in the Saudi government is largely peaceful.

From these same roots have grown the current Islamist groups starting with the Muslim Brethren in the Arab World, some of whose leaders I met with secretly in the 1960's when they were outlawed and I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the theology of their founder. They were pious and idealistic, but their goal was so important to them that they would commit terrorism if other means were blocked. One member greatly influenced Bin Laden in his student days in Saudi Arabia, while others taught in the schools and mosques of south-western Arabia which produced a number of the plane hijackers of September 11.

The Taliban are another such group. These movements normally arise from the interaction of a feeling of trauma, local conditions, and a millennial ideology. The trauma and local conditions in this case included the fighting between the seven major mujahideen groups (with their rival ethnicities and leaders), after they had driven the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The original Taliban (literally, "students") were largely orphans who had lost their fathers in the previous 15 years of fighting and were raised in the religious schools (madrasas) around Peshawar where they learned little beyond the Qur'an and the ideology that all would be well if they got rid of external enemies and initiated a social system based on that of the early Muslim community. After initial success against mujahideen

militias, they were seen as a source of law and order – and hence got Pakistani support and recruits from Pushtuns (also called Pakhtuns and Pathans) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But power corrupted many of them and many Afghans came to resent their strict laws and punishments and the increasing number and influence of outsiders called "Arab Afghans" whom they harbored.

### **Reflections on the Anger Driving Terrorism**

Terrorism is a response to a build-up of grievances real or imagined. Therefore, one cannot drive out terrorism without dealing with the grievances that lead to it. The most obvious of these is the Israel-Palestine conflict because of the frequent news coverage of rock-throwing Palestinian youths, and some suicide bombers, against vastly superior Israeli firepower - with far greater numbers of Palestinians killed.

Arabs and Muslims point to broken promises, from the British promise at the beginning of World War I to support Arab independence in exchange for help in the War effort against their Ottoman Turkish masters, to President Roosevelt's promise in World War II to the Saudi king not to do anything about Palestine without consulting with the Arabs. They note that, instead, President Truman and many U.S. government officials twisted arms in the United Nations to grant the Jews over half of Palestine though they were only 1/3rd of the population and owned only 12% of the land. In subsequent fighting the Israelis gained control of all of it and have continued, Muslims point out, to build settlements in the occupied West Bank despite U.N. resolutions to return the lands conquered in 1967.

I know something of Jewish desperation after the Holocaust, having worked on a rusty tramp steamer out of Haifa that had previously smuggled Jews to Palestine following World War II, but I have also seen the Palestinian refugee camps filled with people whose families had owned the land for centuries. Now they watch its occupiers on television defending it and killing other Palestinians with missiles and F-16s made in the U.S. and purchased with \$3 billion in American military aid each year. Bin Laden, the Taliban's Mullah Omar, and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei ask where were the Americans when they wanted justice. And Arabs and Muslims around the world agree - especially since Jerusalem is the third holiest Muslim site.

Another obvious grievance is the continued sanctions against, and occasional bombings of, Iraq ten years after the Gulf War. The reasons are obvious, but pictures and reports of civilian casualties or U.N. reports of the thousands of children dying from malnutrition and disease - the major victims - continue to inflame passions. For many Arabs Saddam Hussein was another Nasser uniting the Arab World, to many Muslims another Saladin fighting the most recent Crusade, and to many Third World people another Robin Hood stealing from the corrupt rich to share with the poor. Sanctions against Syria, Libya, Iran, and Sudan - plus bombing of a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan without convincing proof of its military use - have fanned the flames of hatred.

A third grievance is the stage on which all the others play – the Muslims sense of being humiliated and in danger. For over a millennium the Islamic empires were the superpowers, and the Sunni Islam of the majority did not develop a theology of suffering, for God seemed obviously to be on their side. Then Western colonial powers divided the Muslim World between them. Today Muslims have not

only been humiliated by the Jews in Palestine, but by the Christian Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, by the atheistic or Christian Russians in Chechnya, and sometimes by the Hindus in Kashmir. After the bomb blasts that killed 24 Americans in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, Bin Laden is quoted as saying, "They have raised the nation's head high and washed away a great part of the shame that has enveloped us."

The ascending of the West is seen, fourthly, as affecting Muslims in a number of ways. It has corroded morality with the flow of alcoholism, drugs, materialism, sexual immorality, and arrogance through movies, television, and two-way travels. Modernist Muslim states have tended to continue the adoption of Western law codes rather than what is believed to be the divinely ordained Islamic laws. Economically the world is seen as controlled by Western global economic ideas based, for example, on charging interest, which is not allowed by Islam. To sum up, Islamists are angered by the fact that they believe they have a superior culture, but the West, especially Americans, have the superior power.

Lastly, with their superior power Americans have espoused democracy but backed Muslim regimes that Islamists feel have tried to crush their own aspirations in, for example, Iran under the Shah, Kuwait, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. For many years Americans have built the Saudi military bases and overseen the training and equipping of both their military and national guard. A significant number of the alleged hijackers in the September 11 tragedies came from the south-western region of Saudi Arabia where all of us who lived there had daily reminders of the American presence with the planes flying out of the local air bases. Osama bin Laden directed his sights on Americans after the Saudi government declined his offer to use Muslim veterans (of the Afghan war against the Soviets) in the Gulf War.

Instead, the Saudis brought thousands of "infidel" Americans on the holy soil of Islam's prophet, and a significant number stayed after the conflict. In 1998 he protested: "For more than seven years the U.S. has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of its territories, Arabia, plundering its riches, overwhelming its rulers, humiliating its people, threatening its neighbors, and using its bases in the peninsula as a spearhead to fight against the neighboring Islamic people."

### **Reflections on Governmental and Christian Responses**

Since much of the anger that has led to terrorism has resulted from years of certain people feeling that the foreign policy of the United States and others with power has been unjust, the first area that must be addressed is foreign policy. Although Americans cannot police the world, there are issues like the Palestine conflict where we can help the opposing parties work out solutions, and we must strive for a maximum of justice rather than just do what is politically expedient at home. Since one person's "terrorist" is another person's "freedom fighter" and many governments in the coalition against terrorism expect support for suppressing their own opposition groups, such action will require a delicate hand - be it in Palestine/Israel, Kashmir, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, or Kurdish areas of Turkey. Also, the world community needs to build on the opportunities the new coalition brings for rapprochement between nations.

Next, relief and development in Afghanistan cannot stop at the end of the military action, as much of it did after the expulsion of the Soviets in 1989. Twenty-two years of fighting, three years of famine and five years of Taliban rule

in Kabul and much of the country have made the situation desperate. There are millions of landmines, and hundreds of men and children on the streets of Afghanistan and Peshawar minus arms or legs. Much of Kabul is in ruins. And there is little food.

Third, as Americans call for revenge we need to be aware of the limitations of military action alone. To kill a "terrorist" makes him a "martyr" that inspires new "terrorists" as the Israel-Palestine conflict has shown. Furthermore a broader action, particularly if it kills civilians, just increases the militants, as the same conflict shows. Coordinated international pressure on a country harbouring terrorists until they give them up proved effective with Pan AM flight 103 and the Libyans - although less effective with Iraq.

Fourth, although the Afghans were not able to hold together a united government on their own in the early 1990s, American and other foreign powers need to keep as low a profile as possible in any help they give to establish a new government because the one thing that history has shown to unite the Afghans is a foreign power on their soil.

Christians need first to trust God to bring some good out of the evil of current events according to Romans 8:28: "In everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." We have already seen how the tragedies of September 11 have turned the "me now" generation in America to God and to each other. Also, the arrest of Christian relief and development workers "for preaching Christianity" has made the world, including the Muslim world, learn of the involvement of Christians in meeting the human needs of Muslims. The Taliban's subsequent expulsion of all Christian aid organizations from Afghanistan got these personnel out of harm's way and focused worldwide prayer on the region.

The church needs next to prepare for the increased human need that there will be among Afghans after the military action takes place. The Christian organizations are already international in personnel. They may, however, need even more Europeans, Asians, and Africans if anti-Americanism develops in Afghanistan outside the Taliban, which has not been the case thus far. Or more single persons or couples without children at home may be needed if conditions get more dangerous.

Christians need also to become more equipped to help moderate Muslims reason with extremists. In Afghanistan when my wife and I pastored the church in Kabul, two people were arrested for giving out four gospels of Luke. We were able to give a Muslim lawyer a defense based totally on the Qur'an, and all the religious charges were then removed. Subsequently, when we pastored the expatriate church in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and got too noticeable, the government prohibited us from meeting in one facility. We were able to share with Saudi officials documentation to show that Muhammad allowed churches as long as the Christians remained loyal. Recently with workers in Afghanistan, we have been able to share with officials arguments from the earliest Muslim sources in support of religious freedom. We can thus help moderate Muslim friends in this way because ultimately it is moderate Muslims who can best deal with extremism in their midst.

Finally, we can look forward to a time of increased receptivity to the gospel among Muslims. The attempt of the Cultural Revolution in China to get rid of Christian and foreign influence led to considerable church growth. Likewise, research at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission has shown that wherever Muslims have tried to enforce Sharia law, as the Taliban have done, and

there are friendly Christians in the region, there is greater receptivity to Christian faith.

Earlier in these reflections I described how my wife and I were walking down the beach in Thailand just after our evacuation from Peshawar, Pakistan, and how we observed dark storm clouds moving across the crescent moon, which symbolized for me what was happening in our world. By the time we walked back, the darkness had settled in, but we noted dozens of fishing boats with lights and a group of people on the beach gathered around candles - each lighting up the place where they worked until the dawn came - and we knew what we needed to do.

As I noted, we learned of the start of the Allied bombing of Afghanistan as we were beginning a communion service. A few days earlier I had been privileged to preach and lead a communion service with aid workers who had just been expelled from Afghanistan. As we reflected on how God had cared for us in previous crises such as the tearing down of the church building in 1973, imprisonments, and evacuations, we felt led to make a pile of stones as God's people did when they crossed the Jordan to commemorate God's care (Joshua 4). Each person carried a stone to the pile that will one day be taken back to Afghanistan when the time of destruction is over and the time to build returns.