

Wahhabism and Jihad

A Challenge to Religious Tolerance

BY PATRICK LANG

SINCE THE HEINOUS ATTACKS on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, the Bush administration has issued an unending stream of statements informing us that these barbarous crimes were committed by people who embrace a “perverted version of Islam” or by those who have “hijacked Islam.” It is also often assumed that Islam is a religion of gentleness and peaceful behavior and that no true Muslim would commit such acts. From the Bush administration’s point of view, it is undoubtedly necessary to generalize in this way, no matter what the truth may be. Coalitions must be built and maintained across the world, and Muslim allies or partners must be made to feel that they are not condemned en masse with the killers.

But generalizations are always defective in some way, and this generalization about the nature of the faith and culture of more than a billion people is massively defective and a burden to sound analysis of the actual threat facing the United States.

War and Nonviolence in Islam

It is true that ordinary Muslims seek to live in peace with

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A man prays at the Muslim holy site of Jabal al-Rahman, the Mount of Mercy, on the plain of Arafah, near Mecca in Saudi Arabia on Feb. 10.

their neighbors. Their Scriptures and traditions oppose the kinds of behavior that killed so many on Sept. 11. The Quran forbids suicide, as it forbids war made upon women, children and the innocent. Nevertheless, the impression has been created that Islam is a pacifist religion, rather like the 21st-century Christianity that has all but abandoned the traditional Christian doctrine of the just war. In fact, Islam is not a pacifist religion. It has never been a pacifist religion. The prophet Muhammad led his armies in person against the enemies of the emergent

Islamic revelation. His successors (caliphs) did the same in the early days of Islamic expansion. The Caliph Omar himself accepted the surrender of Jerusalem when it was captured from the Byzantines.

Nevertheless, it is true that the Islamic tradition contains within it humane attitudes toward life and a spirit of benevolence toward all mankind. This tendency is most clearly found in the mystic Sufi orders, to which a great many Muslims belong. A recent statement by Prince Hassan of Jordan, himself a member of the Naqshbandi Order, offers an example of the thinking typical of the Sufi element in Islam. "Respecting the sanctity of life is the cornerstone of all great faiths" the prince said. "Such acts of extreme violence, in which innocent men, women and children are both the targets and the pawns, are totally unjustifiable. No religious tradition can or will tolerate such behavior and all will loudly condemn it." If this is the thinking of a prominent Muslim, indeed a lineal descendant of the Prophet Muhammad himself, then who is it that attacked us?

The answer is that we were attacked by those who hold the Sufis and most ordinary Muslims in contempt as not really Islamic at all. We were attacked by those who have always been prepared to kill if they could not persuade. We were assaulted by Wahhabism engaged, as they always are, in the pursuit of the central element of their belief, the jihad or holy war.

Wahhabism and the Saudi Kingdom

Sunni Islam, the majority Islamic faith, is a religion of laws, of legal schools and jurisprudence. For Sunnis, God has made law for humanity to live. There are four great schools of the religious law in Sunni Islam. One of these schools is named for Ibn Hanbal (A.D. 780-855), who believed that the law should be seen in a very "boiled down," literalist way that leaves little room for interpretation, adaptation or concessions to modernity.

The Hanbali school of law would probably have died out, discarded by believers as too extreme for "real life," except for an 18th-century scholar named Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, who lived in what is now Saudi Arabia. Abd al-Wahhab embraced Ibn Hanbal's ideas and convinced a desert chieftain named Ibn Sa'ud to accept his version of Hanbalism as the official faith of what eventually became Saudi Arabia. This faith, popularly known as Wahhabism, rejected the right of all other Muslims to

believe and practice Islam in their own ways. It particularly condemned Sufi brotherhoods for their attempts to experience God personally rather than through the rigid observance of Islamic law.

Wahhabism continues to condemn all other Muslims. It cites the Quran's description of war made against unbelievers in the first centuries of Islam to justify, indeed to demand, unceasing war to the death against other less observant Muslims and especially against non-Muslim unbelievers. This war against the "infidels" is the jihad, a moral obligation of every true Muslim. The Wahhabis,

however, insist on an understanding of jihad that other Muslims have long since left behind. For the great majority of "the faithful," jihad has long been divided into the "Greater Jihad" and the "Lesser Jihad." The lesser jihad is the jihad of war, death and blood. The greater jihad is the inner struggle of every pious Muslim to bring himself closer to God through self-denial, charity and a moral life. This was not, and is not, the Wahhabi way. For them, the unbeliever, including non-Wahhabi Muslims, must accept

their view of orthodox religious practice or suffer the consequences.

The early followers of this sect, generally condemned in their day as heretics by other Sunni, did their best to spread their rule by force across the Arabian Peninsula until in the late 18th century the Ottoman Turkish governor of Egypt sent his army into the area and utterly crushed them. From that time until the creation of modern Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the 20th century, Wahhabism was a little-known offshoot of Islam. At that time, Abd al-Aziz al-Sa'ud, the first king of Saudi Arabia, unified the Arabian peninsula by force. By 1925, this process was largely completed. In the new Saudi state, Wahhabism was the official faith and the only one sanctioned by the state. To this day no Christian, Jewish or other religious establishment is allowed in the kingdom.

Wahhabi Missionary Expansion

In the early years of the Saudi state, the jihad doctrines of Wahhabism were ruthlessly enforced by the Ikhwan (Brotherhood) Bedouin armies which had brought the kingdom into being. The Ikhwan's treatment of other Bedouin tribes living in Iraq and Jordan illustrates their intolerance. Believing they had a divine mission, the Ikhwan tribes constantly raided those countries, crossing

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borders that had no meaning for them, to kill peaceful shepherds, their families and livestock. No quarter was ever given to women and children. Such unrestrained violence was an abomination both in Islamic tradition and Arab customary law (*urf*). The atrocities came to an end only when the governments of Iraq and Jordan adopted the tactic of pursuing the Ikhwan into Saudi Arabia to deal with them in 1922-25. The Saudi government then sought to disarm the Ikhwan tribes. This led to a revolt by the zealots, who denounced the king as "no true Muslim." The revolt was put down, and its leaders were executed.

In the aftermath of the Ikhwan revolt, the Saudi government sought to moderate its policies and practices to make it possible to interact productively with the outside world. The Saudi government has followed this path of relative moderation ever since. Saudi moderation became particularly important after the discovery of huge deposits of petroleum in the kingdom before the Second World War. A kind of alliance with the United States in that war created a relationship that, although it has never been formalized by treaty, has stood the test of time. In fact, the relationship cannot be formalized, because Wahhabism does not allow such a relationship with a non-Muslim state. While the Saudi government has pursued its long-term alignment with the United States, very different currents have run beneath the surface of Saudi society.

The Al-Sa'ud royal family created the kingdom by

force. Its members are descended from desert warlords of the central peninsula. They are not descended from the prophet Muhammad, as are the kings of Jordan and Morocco. In their subjects' eyes, their continued legitimacy derives from their support and adherence to Wahhabi Islam. Because of this, it has been very difficult for the royal government to restrict the teaching of Wahhabi doctrines in divinity schools and universities or to prevent the preaching of these doctrines in the country's mosques. It has also been impossible for the government to prevent the export of vast sums of private Saudi money to support Wahhabi missionary works abroad.

What kind of pious missionary works have they accomplished? Schools have been founded across the Islamic world, in Europe and the United States. Mosques have been built and endowed in many places. Sheikh Hisham Muhammad Kabbani, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of America and an adversary of the Wahhabis, recently wrote to the State Department that because mosques in the United States are not regulated by the government as they are in the Islamic world, 80 per cent of U.S. mosques are endowed by Wahhabi groups and have prayer leaders selected by the same groups. As a consequence, the moral formation of American Muslim youth is in Wahhabi hands.

In the 1950's, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt suppressed the Society of the Muslim Brethren (the *Ikhwan*

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Muslimen) and drove them underground. The Muslim Brethren were the oldest and the most murderous of Arab extremist groups. Soon thereafter private money from the oil-rich economies of the Persian Gulf “rescued” the brotherhood from extinction. In the decades since then, the Egyptian Muslim Brethren have become a worldwide network of Wahhabi/Ikhwan cells. They are one of the largest components of the Al Qaeda network created by Osama bin Laden.

Self-Deception in the War on Terror

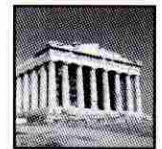
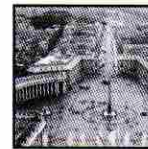
The Wahhabi/Ikhwan movement believes that the Islamic world is corrupt and that the West has corrupted it. They believe deeply that existing governments in their countries must be brought down to make way for a “pure” Islamic life. They believe that the United States is the ultimate enemy, “The Great Satan.” They will do whatever is needed to eliminate the United States as an obstacle to their dreams.

It is against this backdrop of history and religious belief that the endlessly repeated protestations of spokesmen for the U.S. executive branch on the subject of Islam’s “innocence” for 9/11 should be considered. Islam has never turned away from the medieval division of the world into believers and infidels. It has never done so because it has never experienced the equivalent of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation,

which eventually produced societies resigned to the necessity of mutual toleration. In the long history of Islam there have been any number of brave souls who sought to bring their faith to a similar “resignation.” Their fate has been uniformly tragic.

The history of the Wahhabi/Ikhwan movement follows a cyclic pattern, in which periods of adaptation are fiercely resisted by waves of revivalist fighters determined to justify Islam with the sword. These jihadi fighters have never been and are not now the objects of anathema by most Islamic theologians and scholars. They are merely thought to be “extreme.”

As a result we face a dangerous situation, in which the U.S. government considers the Wahhabi/Ikhwan jihadis to be Islamic heretics outside mainstream Islam, while the great majority of Muslim religious dignitaries here and abroad consider them to be only “misguided.” President Bush is undoubtedly correct when he says that we have a long road ahead of us in a fight against bitter enemies. We should ask ourselves if self-deception by U.S. policy makers concerning the nature of those enemies is not more of a handicap than we should impose on leaders who are serious about the fight against global terrorism. Should not the war on terror follow the example of those Iraqi and Jordanian governments of the last century who pursued the Ikhwan jihadi into their lairs and forced the Saudi government to repress their violent activities? **A**



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