



Soldiers of Allah

Next Article in Books (4 of 15) »



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

By IRSHAD MANJI Published: January 6, 2008

Before the Iraq invasion, a young imam offered some chilling advice to Muslims at the University of Toronto: if they could not fight the jihad against America with their souls or their sons, they should fight with their money. The Muslim Students Association told campus authorities that the imam did not represent the true spirit of Islam. With that, the case was closed.

ARGUING THE JUST WAR IN ISLAM

By John Kelsay. 263 pp. Harvard University Press. \$24.95.

“Arguing the Just War in Islam” re-opens such debates. John Kelsay, a professor of religion at Florida State University, shows that today’s freelance fatwa-hurlers rarely capture the best of Islamic thought, but are not wholly divorced from it either. Their pronouncements attempt to pass for “Shariah reasoning,” a tradition of reconciling the Koran’s passages and the Prophet Muhammad’s examples to changing times.

For Muslim militants, however, the times do not change. Because Islam is humanity’s “natural religion,” evolution ended in the seventh century. That means the Islam of 1,400 years ago must be true everywhere and forever. “The militant vision,” Kelsay observes, “is one in which premodern precedents are not so much interpreted as applied.” No wonder a 20-something imam in the cosmopolitan West can feel utterly entitled to champion values straight out of tribal Arabia.

To his credit, Kelsay refuses to whitewash the role of religion in fostering the violence he

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discusses. “Those who wish to argue that Islam has nothing to do with the attacks of 9/11 or with the tactics of Iraqi ‘insurgents’ will find no comfort here,” he warns early on.

Yet his analysis also respects the nuances of Shariah reasoning. Kelsay appreciates Islamic history and delves into detail — though it is often tedious — about how theologians, jurists and dissidents decided what constitutes a just war. Like their Christian counterparts, Muslims have asked and asked again: When may battle be waged? Can noncombatants ever be targets? How much force is proportional? Does negotiation take precedence over a quick and easy victory?

Kelsay could have brought these questions to life had he given us something — anything — about the personalities of the questioners and not merely the process they followed. Stick with him, though. By forensically dissecting the development of Shariah reasoning he illuminates the situation we now face, in which classical Islamic scholars are trumped by bloodthirsty bandits who pose as thinkers.

[Osama bin Laden](#) is hardly the first of them. Consider the assassins of [Anwar Sadat](#), the Egyptian president who made peace with Israel in 1979. His murderers’ manifesto tried to justify Sadat’s killing with Shariah reasoning. Their case was weak — and they knew it. So they turned themselves into tabloid terrorists, exploiting emotion, inflating language and sensationalizing their target’s crime.

In short, Kelsay points out, the thugs resorted to “emergency reasoning.” According to their fevered testimonial about Sadat, “the enemy now ‘lives right in the middle’ of Islamic territory.” Emergency reasoning jettisons the basics of justice along with logic. The charter of [Hamas](#) tells slaves they may fight Zionists without their masters’ permission — thereby accepting bondage in Islam even while preaching liberation from oppressors.

By contrast, traditional Shariah reasoning is sober enough to cut both ways. Take the just-war criterion of protecting innocents. One mainstream Muslim scholar has acknowledged that, in Kelsay’s words, a child’s death may be “foreseeable but unavoidable, as when an enemy’s military resources are deployed in the midst of a civilian population. ... Soldiers whose actions take place under such conditions are excused from the guilt associated with unjust killing.” That ruling would let Israeli defense forces off the hook for collateral damage in their 2006 war in Lebanon, since [Hezbollah](#) deliberately operated in residential Beirut.

To get out of embarrassing pickles like this, the most populist interpreters of just war in Islam go for broke. The televangelist Yusuf al-Qaradhawi is one example. Skirting both tradition and reason, he intones that “necessity makes the forbidden things permitted.” The “forbidden” includes suicide, conveniently redefined as martyrdom. Deep Shariah reasoning takes another tabloid turn.

Kelsay proves that we can understand the shifting rationales behind Islamist violence without excusing that violence. But his generosity also leads him, prematurely, to proclaim Shariah reasoning an “open practice.” Were this true, we Muslims would have already had our liberal reformation. As Kelsay himself notes, unconventional thinkers in Islam pay heavy tolls, from aborted careers to prolonged prison terms to outright execution. An open practice? From the author’s lips to the Almighty’s ears.

Kelsay would retort that mass movements like Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan’s Jamaat-i-Islami were founded by ordinary folk, a schoolteacher and a journalist respectively. Each of them seemingly supported the democratizing of interpretation. After all, they benefited from it.

But their campaigns did not democratize Shariah reasoning at all. As puritan movements, they further restricted who could participate in shaping Islam. Early on, the Muslim Brotherhood closed down bookstores and other dens of free thought. The Jamaat-i-Islami declared a minority Muslim sect inauthentic. To this day, the Islamic world’s only Nobel laureate in science, a member of the banned sect, cannot be buried with proper religious

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rites in his home country, Pakistan.

Nor can moderate Muslims be counted on to rescue Shariah reasoning from militants. The sheik of Al Azhar University in Cairo, widely regarded as the highest seat of learning in Sunni Islam, never directly challenged the manifesto of Sadat's assassins. Kelsay rightly wonders, "Why not insist that militants like bin Laden or al-Zawahiri cease their advocacy of military operations, or that they confine themselves to making the case for reform through normal political channels?"

He provides a fascinating answer: moderates can share key premises with militants. The moderates whom Kelsay has studied "do not in fact dissent from the militant judgment that current political arrangements are illegitimate." Which is not to say they have sought real democracy. Some moderates agree with militants that "democracy implies a kind of moral equivalence between Islam and other perspectives. And such a situation is dangerous, not only for the standing of the Muslim community, but for the moral life of humankind."

The hope rests with "Muslim democrats" who will pluck the Koran and the Prophet out of a tribal time warp. Kelsay focuses on Muslims in America, recognizing three male scholars whose work ranges from online consultations about the future of Shariah to arguments for harmonizing Islam with women's equality and freedom of conscience. He then urges the West to prosecute its war on terror by demonstrating rather than defying democracy. Doing so will help Muslim democrats get heard within their communities — a necessity for all of us, Kelsay suggests, because these Muslims might be the only people who can rehabilitate democracy's appeal after the serial hypocrisies practiced under its banner by Washington, among others.

It is a provocative conclusion, but an incomplete one. Muslim democrats will also have to confront Koranic passages that give militants an escape hatch. The most famous verse tells believers that slaying an innocent is like slaying all of mankind unless it is done to punish villainy. Radical Muslims seize on this loophole. Moderate Muslims sanitize it. Reform-minded Muslims must reinterpret it.

How this happens could well be the next chapter in reclaiming Shariah reasoning and the richness of Islam itself.

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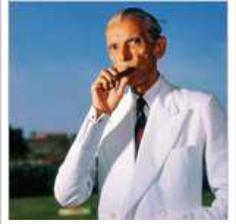
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