

The Theology of Osama bin Laden: History and 9/11

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The Theology of Osama bin Laden:

History and 9/11

Susan Maneck

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1. Email posting "Theology of Usama bin Laden"

First off, I want to apologize for being absent from the list during this very crucial time. I am apparently the only Middle East Historian teaching in the Mississippi State Capital. During the Gulf War I was interviewed frequently by newspapers and radio, leading eventually to my being invited to speak at the Arnold's Weapon Center in Tennessee. I felt I needed to be prepared in case similar inquiries were made in the present situation.

Elianna has raised a question which is not only on our minds, but in the minds of my students, indeed in the minds of all Americans and those possessing any kind of humanity the world over--what kind of people would do this kind of thing? As you are all aware the primary suspect currently is Osama Bin Laden, and even if he is not directly responsible for this horrendous act, it seems apparent that it was committed by those closely related to him and his theology. I think I should take sometime therefore, and explain precisely what that theology is and where it comes from.

Among the Sunnis, the more militant forms of Islam are mostly inspired by the writings of two men, Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb who are responsible for turning the religion of Islam into the political ideology which I would call Islamism.

Mawdudi was originally an Indian journalist before partition who had adopted a fairly rigid form of Islam. He had initially opposed the formation of the state of Pakistan since he knew its founders intended to make it an entirely secular state, despite the fact it was to be founded on the basis of an

Islamic identity. However, when partition occurred he did immigrate to Pakistan and then devoted his energies to turning it into a truly Islamic republic according to his definition.

I first read a book by Mawdudi years ago entitled *The Finality of

Prophethood.* It was designed to be a refutation of Ahmadi and Bahá'í claims to having prophets after Muhammad. But beyond that this book was basically

a Muslim version of *The Late Great Planet Earth.* The most chilling part of it was his description of what would happen when the 'true' Mahdi appeared along with Jesus Christ. They would lead Muslims in an apocalyptic battle against Jews and Christians at, you guessed it, the Plain of Armageddon.

The second important thinker, and the one who probably had an even greater impact on Osama Bin Laden would be the Sayyid Qutb. Sayyid Qutb was an Egyptian who early in his career might have been described as a Muslim modernist, one who believed that Islam and Western secular ideals could be reconciled. He discarded that idea after coming to study in this country between 1948-50. He was treated in America like any other black man and that treatment completely soured him on the West. He came back to Egypt and embraced a much more rigid and militaristic form of Islam.

The form of Islam promoted by men like Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, and embraced by the Taliban and the current government in the Sudan differs from other forms of Sunni Islam in the following ways:

They believe the gate of ijtihad (interpretation) remains open unlike most Sunnis who believe it was closed in the 9th century.

They believe in something called *takfir wa hijr.* This means they hold it impermissible for a Muslim to live in a country not governed by Islamic law without seeking to overthrow and make it Islamic. Otherwise they should immigrate to a place which is truly Muslim.

They hold that any nominally Muslim government which does not abide by the shariah (Islamic law) is therefore really apostate. Such a government should be overthrown and its leaders killed. For this reason, hitherto, most of the violence of Islamist groups was aimed at other Muslims.

This position, I might add, is basically the same one held by the Kharijites in early Islam. The Kharijites were the faction responsible for assassinating the Imam Ali and have been considered dangerous heretics by both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims alike.

They insist in regarding Christians and Jews as infidels rather than people of the book, and therefore are willing to withdraw their protection and even persecute them. This is the reason why there has been so much violence against Christians in both the Sudan and in Egypt.

I hope this information will help you in that worthy goal of defending the true tenets of Islam and combating the prejudice against Muslims in our country and elsewhere.

2. Text of a talk on "History and 9/11," also posted to an email listserver

Intro: Tuesday [date unknown. -J.W.] I spoke at a Phi Alpha Theta forum

dedicated to a discussion of matters related to 9-11. Since it was a panel discussion I only had about five minutes to speak so I discussed the ways in which the study of history might help avert such tragedies. I thought I share with you the talk I gave on that occasion.

Last year in the aftermath of 9-11 I spoke to you here for about an hour and was able to offer you some of the historical background of movements which gave rise to Bin Laden's al-Qaida. But today I've been given less than ten minutes which hardly allows me to give you a history lecture. In Its only slightly more time than you need for a word from your sponsor. Consequently what I'm going to give you today is half way between a sermon and sales pitch.

A few months ago someone asked me what I teach at Jackson State University. When I told him that among other things, I teach the history of the Middle East he said, "Those people aren't like us. They just don't think the way we do."

I couldn't help but think to myself just how much he did have in common with those responsible for 9-11 and just how much of their mentality he shared. You see what this man had done was to 'other' Muslims and people in the Middle East. And it is a very short step between this 'othering' of fellow human beings and killing them without conscience. For that moral injunction common to all the great religions to treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves becomes null and void if we define others as not 'like unto us' and not our neighbors. And all too often it has been the fanatical impulses generated within these same religions, be it in the form of dividing the world between infidels and believers, saved and unsaved, or the children of God and the children of Satan which has encouraged people to do this. And whenever we fail to acknowledge that the demarcation line between good and evil runs through each of our own communities and our own hearts, but rather imagine it to be an axis which exists 'out there' somewhere apart from us, we are sharing the very mentality of those who committed the atrocities of 9-11.

When I gave my 9-11 speech here last year, one of the things I pointed out is that it is a myth to imagine that the study of history very often helps us to avoid the mistakes of the past. It was the attempt to avoid the mistakes of the past (namely WWI) that led the Western democracies to follow the path of appeasement (unfairly) associated with the name of Chamberlain. It was the attempt to avoid the past mistake of appeasement that led us to Vietnam. And I would argue that it was the attempt to avoid Vietnams that, at least in part, led to the events of 9-11. And the attempt to avoid another 9-11 is, in my view, bringing us even now to the brink of another tragic mistake.

So often the attempt to avoid the mistakes of the past only lead us to making new ones. Is there anything then that history can do for us which might have avoided 9-11 or might help to avoid?

Besides avoiding the mistakes of the past, another justification which is often given for studying history is heritage conveyance. The argument goes we should use history understand our own past and to better appreciate how we got where

we are. Such sentiments are understandable, but they cannot help to avoid tragedies like what happened on 9-11. In fact, in some ways such a treatment of history may contribute to it. A heritage conveyance model of history tempts us to present history in ways which support our own self-image and self-esteem. And all too often that has led to a distortion of history and to the kind of othering which makes 9-11s possible. It is this model of history which informed the Western Civilization history surveys which use to predominate in American universities, and all too often still does. In this model history is presented as originating in Mesopotamia and Egypt and marching steadily and triumphally Westward ever since, leaving the rest of the world behind. This 'Plato to NATO' view of history reflects, not the past as it was, but as European-Americans wanted to see it. A more politically correct model of Western Civilization has more recently become popularized which emphasizes the Atlantic World. There more attention is given to the victims of so-called Western Civilization, but the West remains the motor behind history. This Atlantic world emphasis, is in my opinion misguided first, because there is nothing empowering about encouraging anyone to see themselves not as actors in history, but merely its victims. But more importantly this model is wrong-headed because it is a distortion to see the West as the motor behind history, and this invariably will lead to misunderstandings of the present situation. It leaves out, for instance, the fact that the Western identity and civilization was formulated in opposition to great civilization which neighbored it, namely Islam, it leaves out the fact that it was as a continuation of the crusades motivated by hatred for Islam that launched the voyages of Henry the Navigator and Columbus. It cannot help us to understand why so many in the Islamic world might have no great love for the West.

History, if it is to be of any value to us in our present situation must be global in its perspective, for only this can create the kind of understanding which prevents the 'othering' process which I referred to earlier which lead to 9-11s and which can justify the launching of unprovoked wars. In order to provide such a perspective, the history department at Jackson State University has committed itself to becoming the premier institution in the State of Mississippi for the study of global history. Global history presents, not simply a knowledge of the various civilizations in the world, but stresses most especially their inter-relatedness thus combating the 'othering' process with an understanding that we are all in this together. This goal of being the premier institution for the study of global history is not as lofty a goal as it might sound for most of the universities in this state have chosen to focus on a Western Civilization, heritage conveyance model of history, which is why I remain the only Middle East historian in the state. It is further because of moral imperative to utilize history to promote understanding that the history department remains committed to requiring all students to take the two semester course in this history of *global* civilization. And it is the reason why we remain concerned to play a major role in the education of our secondary education social studies teachers and to promote thereby, among all the children of Mississippi, an understanding of the oneness of humanity.

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