

Theology of Osama bin Laden, The

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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:

- 1) They believe the gate of ijtihad (interpretation) remains open unlike most Sunnis who believe it was closed in the 9th century.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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.
- 4) 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, Bill mentioned of defending the true tenets of Islam and combating the prejudice against Muslims in our country and elsewhere.