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Understanding Islam and the Radicals

By [David Forte](#)*October 12, 2001*

The United States is in a war, but it is not a war between Islam and the West. Radical Islamic terrorists hijacked four airplanes and killed thousands of innocent Americans on September 11. But their enmity was not just directed against the United States and the civilization it represents. These terrorists also mean, as President Bush made clear in his speech to the Joint Session of Congress recently, to hijack Islam itself and destroy Islamic civilization.

In the developing battle on behalf of these two great civilizations, it is imperative that we understand something about the basic traditions of Islam so that we can establish the historical and principled differences between Islam as it is practiced by the vast majority of Muslims worldwide and the ideas (and tactics) of the Islamic radicals that advocate terrorism.

WHAT IS ISLAM?

Islam is one of the three great revealed religions of the world. It began in the 7th century with the mission of Muhammad, who, according to the Islamic tradition, received from the Angel Gabriel revelations that were later collected in the book of the Koran. According to traditional Islamic belief, the Koran is a permanent book, coexisting with God through all eternity, whose message was given to every prophet--including Moses and Jesus--starting with Adam.

Islam holds that by the 7th century the message of the Koran had not been received fully, or alternatively, that its meaning had become corrupted, and that Muhammad was given the task to complete the proclamation of the Koran. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last of the prophets, and that the Koran as revealed to him and written down in the years after his death is the true word of God.

The essential message of the Koran is that there is one true God and that individual believers must acknowledge this divine sovereignty and lead a righteous life according to the commandments of the one God to attain Heaven. Indeed, the Arabic word *islam* literally means "to surrender," and in the religious context means to surrender to the will and law of God.

According to Islam, Allah (the Arabic word for God) has many attributes: Allah is merciful, just, all-powerful, and totally immanent in the world. The unity of one, sovereign, eternal God that creates everything and has priority over all creation is an extraordinarily powerful religious focus to the Muslim believer. Though they

regard him as a great prophet, Muslims do not believe that Jesus was the son of God, and hold that the Christian Trinity is a form of degradation of the one God into a kind of polytheism. God cannot be, in any sense, anthropomorphic so Muslims also object to references to God as "Father."

Likewise, the universality of Allah is an important aspect of the Islamic concept of God, so Muslims object to the Jewish notion of being a "chosen" people. Where the Judeo-Christian tradition regards God in a more intimate relational sense and regards God as a personal God, Muslims believe that this denigrates from the purity, the oneness, and the utter spirituality of God.

Muslim devotional beliefs center on what they call the five pillars of Islam.

- The first pillar is the Declaration of Belief (Shahada): There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.
- The second pillar is ritualized prayer (Salat), offered five times a day.
- The third pillar is fasting (Sawm) during the Islamic month of Ramadan, which is the most rigorous fast that any of the major religions require of its adherents.
- The fourth pillar is almsgiving, or the purification of wealth (Zakat). Traditionally, 2.5 percent of one's wealth must be given to the poor every year.
- And the fifth pillar is the pilgrimage (Hajj) that one must make, at least once, out of one's own earnings, to Mecca. There are substitute devotions that one can make near one's home, or in one's abode, if this is not possible.

These regular acts of worship bring Muslims closer to the one God. In addition, the Muslims are prohibited from certain acts, including some sexual prohibitions, the eating of meat, drinking of wine, and so forth. The Muslim attains Heaven or Hell in the afterlife according to one's virtuous life and good merits, which is determined by a balance of all the good weighed against all the evil one commits over the course of the individual's mortal life. On the Day of Judgment, all humanity will be gathered and individuals judged according to their deeds on earth.

THE DIVISIONS OF ISLAM

Within a quarter century after Muhammad's death there came a civil war in Islam to determine his proper successor. Should it be a member of his tribe, or should it be a lineal descendent? This civil war led to the division that exists today between Sunni Islam (which represents the vast majority of the world Islamic community) and Shi'a Islam (large numbers of which are found in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia).

At the same time, and contributing to this larger division, there developed four traditions, and later, a fifth tradition, within Islam that contested with each other to define the essential meaning of the Muslim religion.

One tradition and theological school was that of the Mutazilites, who stressed reason and rigorous logic. The Mutazilites were readers of Greek philosophy, and were close to what the Scholastics were in Medieval Europe. They believed that, although reason's fallibility required the Koran, reason could attain significant knowledge about what was good and was a sure way of attaining communion and nearness to God. They contested the idea that the Koran existed from all eternity and instead asserted that it was a creation of God.

A second group was called the Murjites, who had a simple and straightforward philosophy. They believed that the political leadership of Islam was not worth a war, that peace was incumbent upon all Muslims, that there was no racial or clerical hierarchy in Islam, but rather that all Muslims were equal. No person, no matter the race or class, had any more or less a right to obtain entrance to Heaven than did anyone else. It is because of the Murjite influence that Islam has a strong egalitarian character. The Murjites were not strong supporters of those who thought of Islam in legalistic terms.

Today, the Mutazilites are reflected in many Islamic reformers who seek to make Islam relevant to the modern world, and the Murjites are seen more in the traditional lives of many Muslims: love and brotherhood, respect for equality, following religious devotions to attain righteousness and the benevolence of God.

The third tradition was that of the "legalists," who have become a dominant voice in Sunni Islam. They were the ones who eventually formed the Shari'a, the sacred law of Islam. Today the legalists are represented more or less by modern fundamentalists, who think that some or all of the Shari'a should be the life and the constitution of Islam.

The fourth tradition was called the Kharijites. These were the radicals--one can fairly call them the fanatics. The Kharijites had a violent, politicized notion of Islam, and committed frightful massacres as a result. Their view was that God would reveal the true leader of Islam on the battlefield and that any Muslim who did not obey the religion exactly as the Kharajites understood it was an apostate and can be and should be killed. They made war on every other Muslim who did not follow their exact version of Islam. At one point, they even assassinated Ali, the fourth Caliph. Their objective was to exterminate any competing version of Islam. It took the rest of Islam two centuries to put down that heresy.

The fifth tradition--called Sufism--came two centuries later in reaction to the dominant legalists. The Sufi were mystics, and believed that they could gain oneness with God through the inner life and moral purification. The Sufi tradition and the legalistic tradition have frequently been in severe tension over the centuries.

MODERN ISLAM

In the West, the voice of Islam that is very often heard is the legalistic voice. Indeed, during Western imperial rule, the imperial powers frequently presumed that Islam was the Shari'a and the Shari'a was Islam. In many ways the West's presumption was understandable. In the past two centuries, the West has ruled itself by the notion of positive law. It was not surprising that it sought to find the positive law by which to rule indirectly over a foreign culture. That quest seemed to be validated by the fact that the champions of the Shari'a had formed an institutional tradition through specialized colleges and through forming a specialized class of legal scholars, the ulema. Furthermore, for a number of centuries, the vibrant intellectual conflicts that had been at the heart of Islam in its first centuries had been muted by successive waves of autocratic rule. The strongest remaining intellectual force was the ulema, but they themselves often rejected concepts of legal development within the Shari'a.

The result was that the West came upon a developed but somewhat moribund legal system. Yet the history of Islam itself not only demonstrates that there were competing traditions to the legalistic, but that the governing authorities themselves had from the start reserved the right to remove the qadi (judge) from jurisdiction and establish their own courts to enforce their own law as they saw fit. Any time the state wanted to limit the effectiveness of the Shari'a, they could--legitimately and constitutionally--and they did. The state, for instance, took over criminal jurisdiction. The prohibitions in the Shari'a against theft and adultery are quite primitive and were never developed in any positive law sense. The Islamic legal system, if you take it in its entirety historically, is a wonderfully sophisticated legal system, if we include the actual law that was formulated and enforced, but it is much broader than the sacred law of the Shari'a.

Thus, the great reformers of Islam in the 19th and 20th centuries sought in many different ways to limit, reform, or even reject the Shari'a in favor of legal structures that they believed would enliven Islamic norms within their occupied lands. In doing so, they replicated and continued traditions of thought and practice that were outside of the strict legalistic tradition. Even today, most Muslim countries are ruled by codes of law that are Western in design or influence.

At the same time, however, partisans of the Shari'a, indirectly strengthened by Western imperial rule, believed that the best way to reestablish a society that was truly Islamic was to reintroduce the Shari'a in some or all of its literal details. To them, the Shari'a spells out the behavioral goals of the community.

This is the root of the conflict between the fundamentalists and the more modern Islamic states, which are acting in a way much closer to traditional Islam: trying to reflect Islamic mores, sometimes incorporating the Shari'a, sometimes not. Sometimes the leaders are more cruel than the Shari'a would be; sometimes they are more liberal than the Shari'a would be. Sometimes they are corrupt and immoral, as they sometimes were in the various Islamic principalities and as they often are now. This very mixed, very multi-vocal view, has been the tradition of Islam from the beginning.

The radicals of today are much closer to the Kharijites--a highly politicized form of Islam. They have no compunction with killing Muslims, whether they are in the World Trade Towers or whether there are in Pakistan or Afghanistan, who do not fulfill what they believe is the perfect Islamic code. In this sense they are a throwback to a sect which traditional Islam rejected as un-Islamic. No traditional Muslim, and even a fundamentalist, would say that it is ever legitimate, even in a legitimate war, to kill civilians. The killing of innocents is a sin. But the Islamic radicals have no qualms about violating sacred Islamic law in order to gain power.

Ancient Islam--when there was nothing but empires in the world--used to posit that the world was divided into two spheres: the sphere of Islam, which was also called the sphere of peace, and the sphere of war, which Islam was fighting against. Islamic scholars, both then and now, argue that so long as Islam is not directly under attack, and Islam can be practiced freely, there is not a war between these two spheres. What Osama bin Laden and the radicals believe is that there is no more realm of Islam--no sphere of peace. There is only a sphere of war.

According to the radical view, anyone and everyone opposed to their concept of the world is at war with Islam and must be treated as the enemy. This is why bin Laden attacks Egypt and Jordan; and why he wants to destroy rulers of Saudi Arabia--despite the fact that they, too, are Muslim. Osama bin Laden is making war on Islam the way Joseph Stalin made war on Russia, the way Mao Zedong made war on China. It is in this sense that the radicals have hijacked traditional Islam and are the Marxist vanguard of a new Islam, to be imposed on the rest of the Muslim society--and the rest of the world. If bin Laden has his way, the Taliban would be the Islam for all Muslims. It would usher in a dark age that that great civilization has not seen the equal of.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Over the past 10 or 20 years, the West has tended to legitimize those in the Islamic world who claim that they are trying to enforce the law of the Shari'a. This is partially because we are very law-focused, but also because we ourselves have become so secularized we have failed to perceive the spiritual values of other cultures. For various reasons, the fundamentalist view of imposing some or all of the Shari'a has grown. Some of the Islamic states, such as Pakistan and Egypt, have made compromises with the fundamentalists partly because the West has not been aware of the strength of traditional Islam including its spiritual and rationalist voices.

This fundamentalist view itself has significant human rights problems, such as apostasy and religious

intolerance, and its treatment of women. But the larger problem is that the extremists themselves gained some legitimization as a byproduct. Although Islamic countries do not yet enjoy widespread democracy and representative government, Islam's tradition of equality, its notion that the state serves the community, make free government naturally compatible with its beliefs. However, if the extremists can get other Muslims to believe that the United States is the Great Satan, then they can get them to believe that freedom is not valuable, that toleration is not necessary, and that brotherhood is not required even of Islam.

Most Muslims around the world, and most Muslim leaders around the world, condemned the terrorist attack on the United States and proclaimed that it did not represent or stem from Islam. The West needs to commend this opinion, and begin to appreciate and celebrate the traditional Islam that rejects such violence.

Our policy ought to be that all peoples, of all religions, who fulfill their religion with devotion, charity, equality and concern for others will be celebrated and protected, but that any person--whether in the name of religion or socialism or history--who seeks to take over a state and turn that belief into an ideology, an ideology which terrorizes and kills innocent people, is our enemy and the enemy of all religion.

At a time when we are finally beginning to look at people as Americans even if they dress strangely and worship in a religion with which we are widely unfamiliar, and at a time when those people are seeing themselves as Americans, we must seize the moment and defend and validate traditional Islam--not only for the sake of the West but also for the sake of Islam.

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