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Anonymous	<p>  Posted: 04 Dec 2006 18:39 Post subject: December 2006: War as Worship, Worship as War </p> <hr/> <p>Thank you for visiting the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board.</p> <p>Coming soon is the invited commentary from Ahmed Rehab. To leave your own response to Michael Sells's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a reply, you must register with a personal user ID and password.</p> <p>Debra Erickson Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum</p>	
Anonymous	<p>  Posted: 15 Dec 2006 22:29 Post subject: Ahmed Rehab's response to Michael Sells </p> <hr/> <p>Editor's note: Mr. Rehab's reply has been edited for length. A link to his full response will be posted on the main Web Forum page.</p> <p>=====</p> <p>In this forthcoming book, Jihad and Crusade: Religion and Violence after the Cold War, Dr. Michael Sells tackles a festering subject that spurs the curiosity of many Americans today: "what is the nature of the relationship between religion and violence?"</p> <p>An early observation that has me a little unnerved concerns the first half of the working title: Jihad and Crusade. Though catchy and functional (in that it readily signals Dr. Sells' equitable intent to explore both Christianity and Islam in his treatment of the subject matter), the</p>	

naked juxtaposition of those two concepts implies that Jihad is the Muslim equivalent of Crusade and visa versa. However, Jihad and Crusade are not equal opposites. Strictly speaking, one is a spiritual exercise and the other is a series of historical events....

Of course, it is not Dr. Sells' own opinion that Jihad primarily connotes "Holy War"; rather, it is the de facto interpretation of those Muslims who wage violent campaigns in the name of Islam, often referring to their war as Jihad – as it is that of anti-Muslim demagogues.

Dr. Sells is justified in not getting into the debate over the "correct reading of any particular tradition." Nevertheless, it is incumbent that key words and concepts are operationally defined if they are to be frequently referenced, so that they not assume de facto meanings from pop usage.

The question then becomes, whose definitions of Islamic concepts (jihad, etc) do we assume in scholarly discourse - those given to us by the primary sources and texts, or those given to us by individual polemicists? In his discussion of Al-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Qur'an, Dr. Sells is painfully aware that the two often diverge....

Dr. Sells does not merely laundry-list problematic interpretations of the Qur'an that eternalize the refutation of monotonous and homogenous Jewish and Christian entities. He simultaneously raises pertinent theological and logical questions from within the Islamic context that challenge such understandings, serving a reminder that Khan and Hilali do not hold a scholarly patent on Qur'anic interpretation.

But why linger on apocalyptic interpretations of the Qur'an, as opposed to, say, the constructionist interpretation of Fethullah Gulen, a respected contemporary scholar who has leveraged the Qur'an to inspire millions of Muslims to embrace dialogue and coexistence with Jews and Christians?

Because understanding how the Qur'an can be packaged to write off entire groups of human beings is crucial if we are to ascertain the root problem of religious extremism and terrorism within the Muslim world. Extremism and terrorism are themselves easily explained; however, extremism and terrorism that is condoned – even sanctioned or inspired - by religion need rigorous scholarly exploration.

It is important to state that Khan and Hilali have never themselves urged terrorist attacks against Jews and Christians. Yet the demonization of Jews and Christians prevalent in their translation and interpretation of the Qur'an provides a pretext that can readily be exploited by fiery orators such as al-Tamimi. Without a sense of divine legitimacy, no orator, no matter how mesmerizing, can successfully exhort followers to inter-religious confrontation and war.

The most important idea discussed in this chapter is that of the fixity and fluidity of militant religious identities, the latter of which makes it difficult to find appropriate nomenclature for militant interpretations.

We cannot use the name of a person or a group as they may move beyond a specific interpretation, though the interpretation remains behind, picked up by others.

In my mind, all "extremist" interpretations are 1) "absolutist" and 2) "puritan." Absolutist in that "it's my way or the highway" and puritan in that "I am only interested in how it was done 1400 years ago, when things were pure and unadulterated, any knowledge that anyone else, including my contemporaries, can offer me is contaminated." But even if I were correct, that does not help in naming the brand of Islam that breeds destructive absolutism and Puritanism. One area that I find to be somewhat underdeveloped in this chapter is an analysis of the causation behind militant identities. What causes Bin Baz, Khan, Hilali, and Al-Tamimi to opt for a militant interpretation?

Dr. Sells touches upon the question (but not really the answer) when he talks about a defining moment in the life of young Al-Tamimi. A militant rabbi offends then-tolerant Al-Tamimi with an anti-Muslim diatribe. Dr. Sells points out that such an episode could have just as well spurred a young boy to a life of challenging bigotry, rather than one that is radically confrontational. But it didn't. Why not?

Dr. Sells provides a general answer, which though wise, seems rushed: "At some point human choice, environmental factors, and global interpretive contexts intersected, as always subject to the mystery of human choice and contextual determination, in a fateful encounter, no single factor of which may be the dominant cause, but each of which is significant." □

I could not agree more; however, I think at least one of those factors merits a deeper look by Dr. Sells within the context of a chapter that understudies War and Worship in the speech of an Islamic militant such as this.

Al-Tamimi's profile does not seem to be that of the emotionally vulnerable and naive young man prone to a run-of-the-mill brainwashing. His parents were both successful professionals and he seems to have had a privileged upbringing that fortified him with plenty of confidence, character, and judiciousness. He was by no means gullible, he was not secluded from the outside world; he grew up in the West, a world of fast and free exchange of ideas. He was highly educated, obtaining a Ph.D. and excelling in his scientific research.

There was plenty of human choice involved in Al-Tamimi's trajectory, but there also had to be external forces that tugged at his moral compass to overcome him so. What possible external factors are powerful enough to impact a headstrong product of Western dynamism and cynicism like Al-Tamimi? Certainly not the mere piety and proselytization of an authoritative sheikh from the East, albeit Bin Baz.

For me, what fills the missing link is none other than the environmental

factor, namely the political environment, which I think plays a crucial role in the crystallization – if not creation -- of all modern militant identities. To what extent are the “Christians” and “Jews” that dominate the discourse of the Bin Baz Salafis buzz words for “Americans” and “Israelis” -- or more generally, for all White Christian and Jewish colonialists including the British, the French, and the Italian?

Much of the militant ideologies emanate from within post-colonialist parts of the world – whether nations in the Middle East, or slums in London -- that are deeply incensed by perceived American and Israeli transgressions as well as British and French transgressions, etc. Whether consciously or sub-consciously, these modern grievances seem to inform a revisionist interpretation of the 1400 year old Qur’an whereby Jews and Christians are introduced into the Holy Book as the eternal antagonists.

Whereas few disagree with the fact that Jews and Christians are demonized in the militant Islamic paradigm, the “why” question is seldom asked. The simplistic explanation that is quickly given is that it is something intrinsic to the intolerant and hateful nature of the “militant” or the “radical” or the “extremist” or even the “Muslim” (depending on who is doing the analysis).

I do not seek to justify this demonization, nor do I seek to deny that hatred and intolerance may indeed drive that paradigm, but I do think that both the demonization as well as the ensuing hatred and intolerance are (at least in part) a consequence of a post-colonialist interpretation of the world and the humiliating role of Muslim societies (not Muslims) within it. As such, I wonder if militant identities in Islam have as much to do with failed governments and dwindling economies as they do with problematic interpretations of the Qur’an.

But it is not simply a question of political instability, poverty, and unemployment. Neither Al-Tamimi who was brought up in America or Bin Baz from Saudi Arabia personally suffered from these social ailments.

It is, in the end, a question of the status quo, of power.

Where do Muslim societies stand vis-a-vis the West and Israel? Why do they lag so far behind? Why are Muslim lands still occupied, Muslim civilians still being killed, Muslim resources being sapped? If Muslims do not lag behind in terms of human resources and natural resources, then why do they lack self-determination and are left to be exploited by those powers who wish them no good? These concerns, and not just those of political instability, poverty, and unemployment, loom heavy in the minds of Muslim militant ideologists, as they do for many non-militant Muslim thinkers.

The difference lies in how those questions are answered. For the

militant ideologists, the answer is provided within the context of victimhood: the notion that "we have done nothing wrong to ourselves or to others; our foes have done everything wrong to us. There is nothing that we can do to change our predicament but to take on the enemy who embodies evil and Godlessness in order that justice, peace, and prosperity can prevail."

It is within this context and that context alone that apocalyptic world views, eternal homogenous entities, and conflict-identities find fertile ground to thrive and do their deed. Or is it?

I think it is worth some reflection from Dr. Sells. I personally would be curious to read his thoughts. I very much enjoyed the chapter, which I found to be thought-provoking, and I look forward to the book.

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Ahmed Rehab
Executive Director, CAIR-Chicago

All times are GMT

