What's Religion Got to Do With It? Comments on Bruce Lincoln’s Essay on the Meditations of Mohammed Atta

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What is interesting about Bruce Lincoln’s close reading of the al Qaeda manual left by Mohammed Atta in his luggage on the morning of September 11, 2001, is not only the text, but the subtext. Lying beneath the pious rhetoric of the manual and its eerie ties to the World Trade Center tragedy is the perplexing issue of the role of religion in the contemporary world. How could religion be related to such vicious acts of political violence?

The common sense way of putting this question about the September 11 attack and all of the other recent acts of religious terrorism is “what’s religion got to do with it?” The common sense answers to this question are varied, and they are contradictory. On the one hand some political leaders—along with many scholars of comparative religion—have assured us that religion has had nothing to do with these vicious acts, and that religion’s innocent images have been used in perverse ways by evil and essentially irreligious political actors. On the other hand there are the radio talk show hosts and even a few social scientists who affirm that religion, especially Islam, has had everything to do with it—and not just ordinary religion, but a perverse strain of fundamentalism that has infected normal religion and caused it to go bad.

Bruce Lincoln’s wise reading of the Atta manuscript shows both answers to be incorrect. Lincoln leaves us with no doubt that Mohammed Atta and his eighteen accomplices on that dark morning of September 11 were filled with a religious zeal and undertook their hideous assignment in a ritualistic act of self-sacrifice following traditional tenets. Moreover, although the ideology of their mentors was influenced by a certain strain of Islamic political thought characterized by the writings of Mawdudi, al Banna and Faraj, to which only a minority of Muslims subscribe, the religious practices and rituals were
themselves not deviant. The actions prescribed for the nineteen on the morning of September 11 were well within the norm not only for Islamic belief and practice, but also for many other religious traditions. Skewed though their political views may have been, one could say on the basis of this text that Atta and his colleagues died as good Muslims. Had they been Christians or Hindus they would have died as good adherents of those faiths as well.

What the Lincoln reading of the Atta manuscript shows is that Atta’s act was done in a classically religious manner. Rightly, however, Lincoln does not go beyond this assertion. He does not try to argue, for instance, that Atta’s act was motivated by religion or meant to achieve a religious purpose. In other words, the form that the activity took was a religious one, but the content of that activity—the point of the terrorist act—seemed, at least at first blush, to be elsewhere. The content was about politics, and society, and many other things other than the ideas and images that we narrowly ascribe to the realm of religion. Atta and his crowd were not trying to promote Islam, at least not in a narrow sense. Although they have little use for modern secular Western culture, the al Qaeda program has not targeted Christianity or any other religion as its opponent. Bin Ladin’s battle with the West is not a war between religions. Hence it seems that his acts of terrorism, and the many other contemporary acts of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh terrorism, are done in a religious way without necessarily being about religion.

This brings us back to the violence of religious terrorism and the central question—“what’s religion got to do with it?”—without a simple answer. Such acts of terrorism are not religious in that they are certainly not about the imposition of one kind of traditional religion on others. And yet they are clearly about religion in the form that their actions take, and perhaps also—in a nontraditional way—in their substance as well.

These acts are symbolic statements about an imagined war, a war between worldviews. This is a point made by Lincoln in the final pages of his essay where he describes the September 11 event as a statement describing the
encounter between “two different types of society and two different types of power.” The type of society and type of power that Mohammed Atta represented was one in which religious ideas and images suffused all aspects of social order. We ordinary citizens of the modern secularized West and the culture, politics, and society with which we are associated represent the “other” in this dichotomous view of the world.

This way of thinking was brought home to me by another representative of the far-flung al Qaeda network, one of the men convicted of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. When I interviewed Mahmud Abouhalima in prison in the mid-1990s he told me a little parable to illustrate what it was like for someone like him to live in American society. It was a story commonly told in the Middle East and South Asia about an orphaned lion that was abandoned at birth and raised by a flock of sheep. The lion did not know that he wasn’t a sheep. But one day as the flock gathered at the water hole he peered in at his reflection and saw that he was not like the others.

“That’s what Islam has taught me in America,” Abouhalima said proudly. “I’m not a sheep.”

Ordinarily I hesitate to argue with the people I interview, but on this occasion I felt personally challenged. “I’m not a sheep either,” I said to Abouhalima. I explained to him that one cannot tell much about American people simply from their vacuous popular culture. In my case, I explained, I felt in touch with spiritual values and experienced a moral rudder in my life that had religious depth.

Abouhalima simply smiled and resisted my attempts to declare what must have appeared to him to have been a kind of pseudo-religiosity. “You are a secularist,” he declared.

From Abouhalima’s point of view the two worlds cannot easily mix. The lions and sheep of this world cannot lie down together easily, nor can they coexist in a world of globalization that seems designed by and for the benefit of sheep.
Hence the movements of religious activism represented by al Qaeda can be seen as resistance movements. Religion has replaced Marxism as the ideology of opposition. In most cases the religious rebels are opposed to a secular state, one that they want to replace with a religious nationalist authority. In other cases, such as al Qaeda, the activists are transnationalists. Their theater of action is on a global scale, and their opposition is globalization itself. They are to a large extent guerrilla antiglobalists.

At the same time, however, the transnational network of their movement and the global vision of the great war in which they imagine themselves points in a global direction of its own. In his videotaped statements, Osama bin Laden has referred to the Ottoman Empire as the kind of transnational Islamic entity that could be revived on a global scale. In this sense Bin Laden and his ilk are alternative globalists. The social world suffused with religion that they hope for is not a traditional society of the past but a new, alternative modernity—or perhaps more accurately a postmodernity—one with global dimensions.