Response to Bruce Lincoln’s *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, specifically the second half of Chapter One entitled “Mr. Atta’s Meditations, Sept. 10, 2001: A Close Reading of the Text”

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Let me offer first some general reflections, then specific qualifications about this essay relative to the growing mountain of post 9/11 literature. First, “Mr. Atta’s Meditations” does what Bruce Lincoln does so brilliantly and so often: It offers insight into a text apart from, and also against, its usual interpretation. In this case, the text is the instructions from one of the hijackers central to the ‘success’ of 9/11. Because 9/11 has become a day of infamy/tragedy in recent American history, that text could be, and already has been, seen as part of a generic category called Islamic fundamentalist/extremist/terrorist rantings against the West. It has been decried alike by Muslims, most of whom distance themselves from such polemical diatribes, and non-Muslims, some of whom want to see them as precisely a sign of the Muslim=Arab=terrorist threat to Western civilization, in general, and the USA, in particular.

Bruce Lincoln sidesteps both these interpretive minefields and instead offers what might be called motive analysis by deduction. Reading Mr. Atta’s set of instructions or meditations AFTER the event of September 11, he tries to decode what the deceased terrorist/martyr thought he would be doing through this carefully coordinated and efficiently executed scheme. Bruce Lincoln believes that all the clues to Mr. Atta’s motives, and those of his coconspirators in crime/holy war, can be deduced from this single text; hence the need announced in the subtitle to his essay: “A Close Reading of the Text.”

Second, one must ask whether this interpretive strategy is adequate. Does Bruce Lincoln succeed as fully as did Mr. Atta? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because no one who has read either this chapter or the larger book in which it is
located will again be able to think of Mr. Atta’s luggage as mere accessories to the crime/hercic act of the 9/11 hijackers. Moving from a summary of the text in Part One to analysis of practice in Part Two of this essay/subchapter, Bruce Lincoln shows how the practice itself relates to three layers of discourse. Each depends on, and interacts with, the other, yet analytically they can be, and have been, separated, then diagnosed—to use one of Bruce Lincoln’s favorite phrases—in maximalist fashion. Lincoln unpacks the divine resource—Allah and the Prophet—as layer one, then prayer or supplication as layer two, and finally Quran or Holy Writ as layer three.

It is really the third layer, or stratagem, that is most successful. The other two, while valuable, would not work without being undergirded and reinforced by the third. This is God’s Word, and this is God’s Word as it inspired and produced success for the earliest Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. The analogies over time are then adduced by Bruce Lincoln in another crystalline image, this time not verbal but visual and verbal. In a single diagram or flow chart, he sums up the worldview of Mr. Atta and his accomplices. The whole world is dichotomized: us vs. them pervades history from beginning to now. The 7th century Muslims succeeded because they first identified, then attacked, and eventually overcame their enemies, the Jahiliyyah. Ever since, the world has been one of believers vs. infidels—we Muslims vs. non-Muslim others—and in the latest chapter of this perpetual struggle, it has fallen to al Qaeda to take up the challenge forfeited by other Muslims, especially by present-day Muslim polities, to confront and to defeat the new Jahiliyyah—the West, so-to-speak, and the USA in particular.

I applaud the precision, the insight, the success of Bruce Lincoln’s interpretive toolbox as it has been unpacked and applied to these little-known or misconstrued elements of the 9/11 event. I agree, too, with the final point about historical analogues. It is not Pearl Harbor but Hiroshima that evokes the strongest parallel. The evocative power of iconic moments often bares little resemblance to ground level facts of their actual occurrence. Hiroshima is remembered as having inaugurated the Age of Nuclear Warfare/Holocaust. September 11 will be
remembered as having inaugurated the Age of the War on Terror.

But will it not also be remembered as having marked and marred the Golden Age of the American Empire? For beyond the dichotomy imposed by the Cold War, where the global order was defined by Communist/Capitalist, USSR vs. USA rivalries, there is now a sense in which American power is being projected as untrammelled. Assistant Secretary of State Charlotte Beers speaks glowingly of the USA as the world’s first ‘hyperpower,’ while conservative prognosticators like Frances Fukuyama laud the inevitable triumph of Western values over latter-day Manichaeans, Islamo-fascists. Islamo-fascists?! Yes, the term is Mr. Fukuyama’s, not mine, and it applies for him to Mr. Atta and his coconspirators. They are a dying species, according to the French political sociologist Gilles Kepel, and in the near future, we are told, certainly by 2020, those of us prescient with foresight will have seen how moderate Muslims reclaimed true Islam and joined non-Muslims in the parade toward a new world order that crossed all economic, political, and cultural boundaries. Utopia will have arrived, to the dismay of not only Mr. Atta but also his Muslim and Christian and Jewish co-Manichaeans who had hoped and prayed, worked and died for an opposite outcome.

My only critique of Bruce Lincoln’s superbly staged argument is that it does not provide bridges to these other speculations about a post 9/11 world. The place where they could have been introduced is exactly at the diagram (depicted on p. 14 of Holy Terrors). What al Qaeda (Mr. Atta’s parent group) neglects, as do other scriptural primitivists, is the complex ebb and flow of world history. There was no straight line from the 7th century to the 21st century. There were many detours and distractions. Among them were Islamic empires in the middle period. These empires—Safavid and Mughal as well as Ottoman—rivaled the other cosmopolitan polities of the premodern world, but they were all eclipsed in the early modern period by encroaching European powers—French, British, Russian, and Dutch. Only the devastation of two World Wars weakened the hold of these European powers on parts of Asia and Africa marked as Muslim. And only since World War Two have
there emerged postcolonial seemingly independent Muslim states that still remain in the double shadow of a Muslim and non-Muslim imperial past. And only now, since the end of the Cold War little more than a decade ago, have we also seen the full-blown contradictions of a postcolonial, post-Manichaean world system.

None of this history is unknown to Bruce Lincoln, and while la longue durée does appear inter alia in the rest of his new book, he could have introduced some tags in the current essay/subchapter to connect its forensic insights to those major and still crucial crisis zones in the 21st century.

On balance, the interpretive advance of this essay is much more significant than my diachronic quibble with its showcase diagram. As always, the catalytic value of Bruce Lincoln’s work makes even its critique more resonant. I stand by my back-cover blurb for the book as a whole: “This daring and masterful work will compel us to reconsider conventional ideas of religion, politics, and culture,” and it all begins with Mr. Atta’s meditations.