

“Mr. Atta's Meditations, Sept. 10, 2001: A Close Reading of the Text¹”

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I

In the following pages, I want to consider the set of instructions Mohammed Atta left in his luggage on the morning of September 11, 2001, along with his last will and testament, apparently intending that these papers be found after his death. Two other copies of these same instructions were found in the effects of hijackers on other planes, which suggests that, at a minimum, these were provided to the leaders of each team, who used them to prepare for – and understand – their deeds of 9/11.² Although these documents bear no signature, authorship is best attributed to the apparatus responsible for the attacks, the al Qaeda network. Close reading permits one to see how religious discourse construed mass murder and terrible destruction as religious practices, and also affords insight into the way al Qaeda constitutes itself as a religious institution that acts on behalf of a broader religious community (the Islamic *ummah*).

The text begins with formal invocations, one quite orthodox (“*In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate,*” §1) and one almost shockingly unconventional (“*In the name of God, of myself and of my family,*” §1). After this, it segues into prayer, prompting the reader to ask forgiveness for all his sins (something that would be granted a martyr [*shahid*]) and to view the coming events as deeds done to glorify God (§1). Having thus gestured toward the immediate future, the text recalls a moment from the paradigmatic past, which it frames as the model for what is to come: “*Remember the battle of the prophet... against the infidels, as he went on building the Islamic state*” (§2).

The balance of the text is organized in three sections and describes how to prepare for the coming operation. A few paragraphs treat technical matters (§§3, 4, 15), but the overwhelming majority address spiritual concerns. Even

those items explicitly identified as “*worldly things*” (§16) are invested with religious significance, as when the men are told to wear tight fitting clothes “*since this is the way of the pious generations after the Prophet, [who] would tighten their clothes before battle*” (§16).

Along these lines, the first paragraph of the text’s first section (“The Last Night”) includes suggestions that have struck uninformed readers as banal, profane, or pedestrian: “*Shave excess hair from the body and wear cologne. Shower*” (§3). In the last paragraph of the same section, however, cleansing one’s body is described as ablution: a ritual act of self-purification that helps secure salvation.

*Pray the morning prayer in a group and ponder the great rewards of that prayer. Make supplications afterwards, and **do not leave your apartment unless you have performed ablution** before leaving, because **the angels will ask for your forgiveness as long as you are in a state of ablution**, and will pray for you. (§17)*

In general, the hijackers’ last night on earth is treated as a time for spiritual preparation, during which they should pray for success, victory over their enemies, also for God’s mercy and assistance, making use of specific prayers at appropriate times and places (§§7, 8, 10, 13, 17). In addition, they should read and reflect on the Quran, especially two sūras that treat battles against non-believers: Sūras 8 and 9, which are explicitly commended in §5 and repeatedly cited thereafter (§§6, 21, 28, 30, 33). Mere reading, however, was not enough. Verses of the Quran were to be spoken into cupped hands, then rubbed into one’s body and equipment so their power could be quite literally incorporated (§14). The men were to review their plans (§4), check their equipment (§15), anticipate problems that might arise (§11), and calm themselves with the

knowledge that paradise was near (§§6, 9, 10, 11; cf. §§23, 24, 25, 30, 36). Most sweepingly, the text advised: “*Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called ‘this world.’ The time for play is over and the serious time is upon us*” (§9).

The section titled “The Second Step” treats the interstitial period between leaving home on the morning of 9/11 and entry into the plane. Driving to the airport, the men should “*remember God constantly*” (§18) and thereafter offer a series of prophylactic prayers every time they enter new space or terrain (§§18, 19, 23, 26). Implicitly acknowledging the anxieties they will experience, the text counsels its readers to master fear, which it defines as a great form of worship appropriate only for God (§§21, 22). Time and again, it promises victory and paradise, effortlessly mixing Quranic allusions with reassurance of God’s support.

“The Third Phase” treats events inside the plane, beginning with the prayer one offers at the threshold. Once seated, the men were to run through all their prayers once more, keeping “*busy with the constant remembrance of God*” (§27; cf. §§28-29). Finally, the text discusses the violence needed to seize the plane and the ethical problems posed by these bloody acts. It admonishes that killing is to be done without anger (§32) and ought not cause pain (§31), while insisting that no prisoners be taken (§33) and no compassion ought compromise the mission (§31). Two arguments are provided not simply to justify, but to sanctify the shedding of blood. The more frequent, predictable, and important of these is citation of the Prophet Muhammad’s military practices as a legitimating and inspirational model (§§29, 32, 33, 37). More original – and more shocking – is constitution of the hijackers’ first victims (i.e. the flight attendants) as sacrificial beasts, whose throats would be slit in ritual fashion (§31; cf. §15).

Imagining the moment when its readers have taken control of the planes, the text envisions a short time for congratulations, when one could cite

appropriate verses from the Quran, sing an inspirational song, and sip water as minimal reward for a job well done (§§34, 35). After which, comes the finale:

When the hour of reality approaches... wholeheartedly welcome death for the sake of God. Always be remembering God. Either end your life while praying, seconds before the target, or make your last words: 'There is no God but God, Muhammad is His messenger.'
(§35)

II

If we consider this text and its relation to the events of 9/11, it is convenient to begin with practice. The instructions rarely treat the mission as a whole and never mention its fiery finish. Instead, the operation is atomized, decomposed into a series of minute actions, each of which is invested with religious significance in one fashion or another. Thus, bathing is treated as ablution and connected to purifying one's soul (§§3, 9, 17). Dressing is represented as girding for battle, with care to preserve modesty, and follows the model established by the first Muslims (§16). Tying one's shoes has the same significance attached to it (§16), while all items of one's equipment – luggage, clothes, knife, papers, and personal effects – are to have prayers physically embedded in them (§14). Riding in a taxi becomes an occasion to remember God, with separate supplications for entry and leaving (§18-19). Stepping into the plane is experienced as part of “a *battle for the sake of God*” (§27), and the instant the plane begins to move one should pray, “*because you are traveling to Almighty God, so be attentive on this trip*” (§27). In similarly maximalist fashion, sharpening one's knife is preparation for a ritual of sacrifice (§15); gritting one's teeth, a repetition of gestures used by the first Muslims (§29), as is singing songs to boost morale (§34). Throughout their mission, the men are counseled “*Be busy with the constant remembrance of*

God" (§27). Further, "*You must remember to make supplications wherever you go, and anytime you do anything, and God is with his faithful servants*" (§26).

The text effectively instructs its readers how to overcome whatever hesitations might interfere with their mission. Acknowledging the possibility of fear, doubt, and moral qualms (§§6, 9, 11, 21, 22, 24, 31, 37), it offers a program of exhortation and reassurance to those on the brink of terrifying acts. Indeed, its goal is to close whatever gap might remain between the ideals al Qaeda advocates and their full realization in these men. "*Do not seem confused or show signs of nervous tension,*" it counsels, "*Be happy, optimistic, calm, because you are heading for a deed that God loves and will accept*" (§24; cf. §§6, 14, 29). This last phrase concisely summarizes the text's persuasive project: definition of the entire undertaking – theft of the planes, murder of their crews, and the final paroxysm of death and destruction – as something religiously sanctioned: "*a deed that God loves and will accept*" (§24).

That task is accomplished by welding practice to discourse: providing each grubby, banal, or lethal act with authoritative speech that ennobles and redefines it not just as a moral necessity, but also a sacred duty. Three different bodies of discourse are used in this fashion. The first is that of the text itself, which mobilizes and encapsulates the others. Its authorial persona having been effaced, it manifests impersonal certainty and fervor, speaking a language drenched in piety, through which it purports to make the divine will patently apparent. God himself is mentioned a full eighty-nine times and appears in more than three-quarters of the document's thirty-eight paragraphs (30/38). Mentions of the Prophet and the first generation of Muslims are also frequent (25x in 15 paragraphs), and hardly a paragraph goes by without discussion of such topics as purification (5x), martyrdom (5x), the need to struggle against infidels (11x), or the promise of heavenly reward (6x).

Second, there is prayer, the discourse – also the practice – that connects the human to the divine through the medium of language. In nine different

paragraphs, the text enjoins prayers or supplications appropriate to the following occasions: evening (§§7, 13), morning (§13, 17), when entering a car (§18), when entering a town (§§13, 18), when entering a new place of any sort (§§18, 19), when in motion (§26, 27), before meeting the enemy (§13), for victory (§§7, 28), and at the moment of death (§35). Once again, a maximalist intention is evident in the desire for religious devotion to fill all time, space, and action, maintaining unbroken one's connection to God and calling forth his reciprocity.

You must remember to make supplications wherever you go, and anytime you do anything, and God is with his faithful servants, He will protect them and make their tasks easier, and give them success and control, and victory, and everything... (§26)

Finally, there is the most privileged discourse of all: that of the Quran, which the instructions implicitly claim to mediate, while parasitically appropriating as much of its authority as possible. No fewer than twenty-two Quranic quotations appear in this text and many more allusions. No doubt is permitted concerning the divine status of scripture, since citations are invariably introduced as God's word (§§6, 11, 12, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 30, 33, 34, 37).³ Most emphatic is the following formulation.

Remember God frequently, and the best way to do it is to read the Holy Quran, according to all scholars, as far as I know. It is enough for us that it is the words of the Creator of the Earth and the plants, the One that you will meet [on Judgment Day]. (§8)

Shrewd use of Quranic citations also permits the instructions to blur the present moment with paradigmatic events of the past. Regularly, the passages the text chooses to quote describe the first generation who heeded the Prophet's call and took up arms to defend the new faith (§§12, 21, 28, 30, 33, 34, 37). These fervently committed Muslims overcame enemies far more numerous than they (§§12, 37) and their victory is attributed to God's support, with the result that power is redefined as a function of piety rather than wealth, arms, or numbers.

This point is made in several passages to which the instruction text gives double emphasis. These are found in the two chapters of the Quran that the text commends as proper reading for the "last night" (§5). Having insured that the men would have read these passages and would understand their original context, the text quotes key phrases from them in ways that connect their contents to the bold actions planned for 9/11. Thus, in discussing the hijackers' approach to the airport, the text takes up the question of American technical superiority. *"All of their equipment and gates and technology will not prevent, nor harm, except by God's will,"* it explains, *"The believers do not fear such things. The only ones that fear it are the allies of Satan, who are the brothers of the devil"* (§21). Then it goes on to quote a Quranic phrase, by way of reassurance: *"so fear them not, and fear Me, if you are believers"* (§21). This comes from a passage that says nothing about technology, but thematizes the conflict as one of believers against unbelievers.

Fight the leaders of unbelief...

Are you afraid of them?

You would do better to be afraid of God, if you are believers.

Fight them, and God will chastise them at your hands

And degrade them, and He will help you

*Against them, and bring healing to the breasts of a people who believe.*⁴

III

In like fashion, the text redeploys familiar and evocative Quranic terminology to construct al Qaeda's chosen adversary not in terms of national, racial, or political alterity, but as people to whom one is opposed on strictly religious grounds. They are infidels (§§2, 28), non-believers (§§22, 30, 32), and allies of Satan (§21), while the text construes its readers and authors as believers (§§19, 21), the faithful (§§12, 27), allies of God (§22), and God's faithful servants (§§26, 37). Over the course of its discussion, the hijackers gradually merge with the pious heroes who made possible Islam's initial triumphs and become their reinstantiation (§§2, 16, 29, 32). Conversely, the U.S. becomes the contemporary incarnation of *Jahiliyyah*: the barbarism and spiritual ignorance that preceded Islam and offered savage – but misguided and unsuccessful – resistance to the Prophet, his armed followers, and his message (Figure 1).

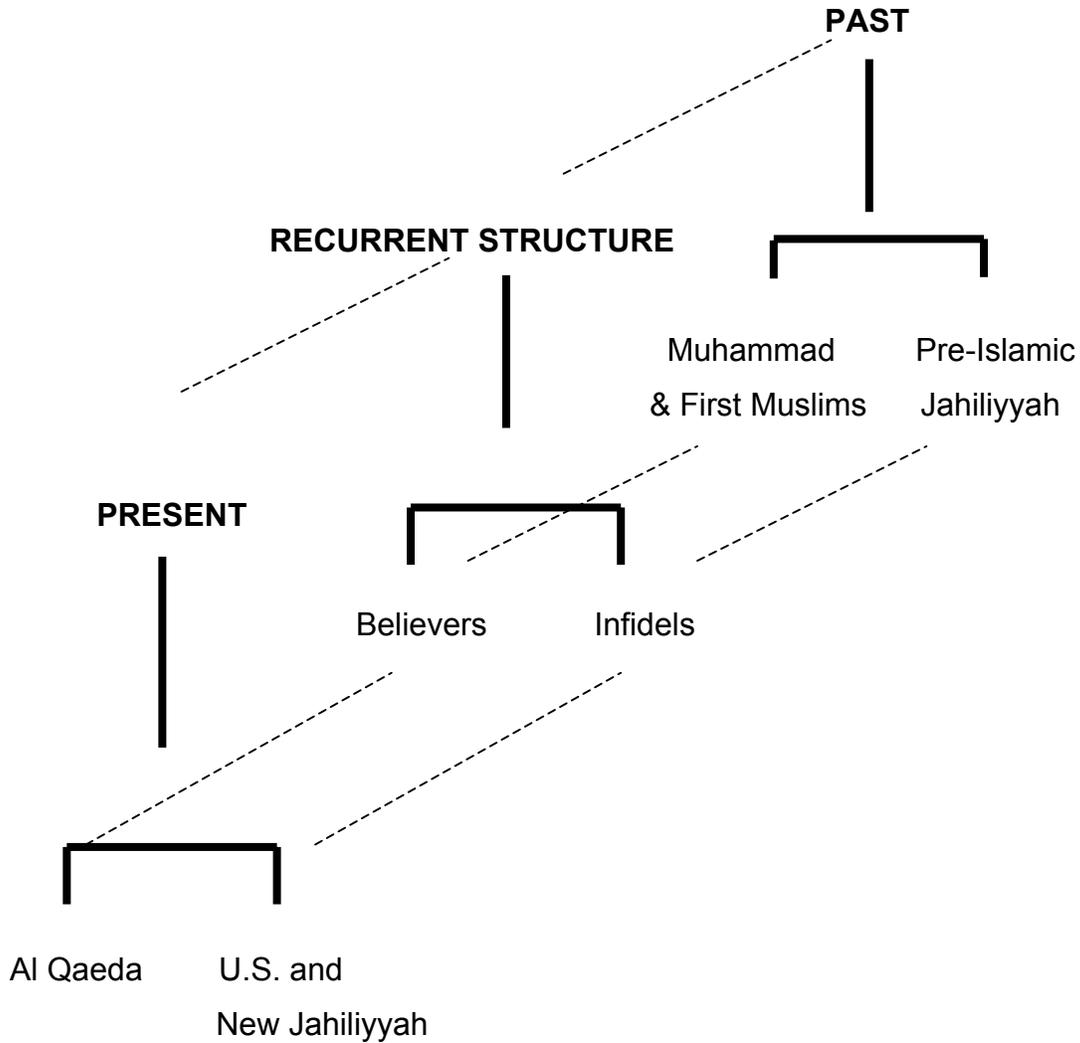


Figure 1: Alignment of contemporary struggles with those of the early Muslim era.

Al Qaeda thus implicitly represents itself as the most faithful heir to the Prophet and his original followers, and the implacable enemy of savage non-believers. Seemingly strong, the latter are actually weak and will be defeated, as were their *jahili* ancestors. Such a view picks up on the analysis advanced by Sayyid Qutb in his last, most radical writings, where he argued that a new and more virulent *Jahiliyyah* introduced by the West had made powerful inroads

within Islam. To counter that trend, restore proper religion, and rescue the world from its own most profane impulses, he argued that a small group of the faithful would have to withdraw from the corrupt world in a repetition of Muhammad's *hegira*. From safe redoubts, they could prepare to meet and overthrow the *jahili* order, with confidence in God's support. Compounding his earlier maximalist views with a new militance, he thus produced blueprints usable for a group like al Qaeda.

Jahiliyyah always takes the form of a living movement in a society and has its own leadership, its own concepts and values, and its own traditions, habits, and feelings. It is an organized society and there is a close cooperation and loyalty among its individuals, and it is always ready and alive to defend its existence consciously or unconsciously. It crushes all elements that seem to be dangerous to its personality.

When jahiliyyah takes the form not of a "theory" but of an active movement in this fashion, then any attempt to abolish it and to bring people back to Allah would be useless if it presented Islam merely as a theory. Since jahiliyyah controls the practical world and has a living and active organization for its support, mere theoretical efforts to fight it cannot even be equal to it, much less superior. When the purpose is to abolish the existing system and to replace it with a new system which in its characteristic principles and all its general and particular aspects, is different from the controlling jahili system, then it stands to reason that this new system should also come into the battlefield as an organized movement and a viable group. It should come into the battlefield with a determination that its strategy, its social organization, and the relationship between its individuals should be firmer and more powerful than the existing jahili system....

Islam's theoretical foundation – the belief – therefore must be actualized in the form of an organized and active group from the very beginning. This group must separate itself from the jahili society and become independent and distinct from the active and organized jahili society whose aim is to block Islam. The center of this new group should be a new leadership, the leadership which first came in the person of the Prophet himself, peace be on him, and after him was delegated to those who strove to bring people back to Allah's sovereignty, authority and laws.... The Muslim society cannot come into existence simply as a creed in the hearts of individual Muslims, however numerous they may be, unless they become an active, harmonious, and cooperative group, distinct by itself, whose different elements, like the limbs of a human body, work together for its support and expansion, and for its defense against all those elements that attack its system. This group must work under a leadership that is independent of the jahiliyyah so it can organize its various efforts in support of one harmonious purpose, and strengthen and widen the Muslims' Islamic character in order to abolish the negative influences of jahili life.⁵

IV

By associating itself with the first generation of Muslims in the fashion urged by Qutb, the al Qaeda network conceived itself as a militant vanguard institution, mounting counteroffensives on behalf of the Muslim community. That community, in their view, had been weakened by the influence of savage non-believers, whose ways are debased and irreligious. Overcoming them becomes possible only as the vanguard recovers and revives the proper Islamic faith, by grounding all practice – indeed, all existence – in the sacred discourse revealed by God through his Prophet.

Finally, we are ready to consider the morning of September 11. No prose can capture the events of that day or the emotions they occasioned. No analysis can soften the impact of steel in flight with tall, but vulnerable towers. No attempt at interpretation can quell one's anguish and sorrow for the thousands buried in the rubble.

It is tempting, in the face of such horror, to regard the authors of these deeds as evil incarnate: persons bereft of reason, decency, or human compassion. Their motives, however – as revealed by the instructions that guided their final days – were intensely and profoundly religious.⁶ We need to take this fact seriously, uncomfortable though it is, since it can tell us important things about the events of the 11th, the broader conflict of which those events are a part, and also the nature of religion. For if there is one thing they make abundantly clear, it is that religion and ethics are not indivisible.⁷ Rather than being a divine and unfailing ground of morality, religion begins with a human discourse that constructs itself as divine and unfailing, through which deeds – any deeds – can be defined as moral. It was their religion that persuaded Mohammed Atta and eighteen others that the carnage they perpetrated was not just an ethical act, but a sacred duty.

The religion in question was not a monolithic entity that can be labeled “Islam.” Rather, these men embraced an extremely militant reformulation of maximalist currents within Islam. To be sure, there are those who consider this style of Islam – which others have termed “Islamist” – to be Islam proper, and who polemically characterize all other styles as adulterations and perversions of one sort or another. But we need not repeat that error, any more than we must accept their view of the West – America, above all – as monolithically minimalist and utterly debased in its style of religiosity.

This construction has roots in Qutb's *Milestones* (1964), and can be traced a bit further to Hasan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, and Abu Ala Mawdudi, who founded the Jamaat-I Islami about 1941.⁸ More

recently, as American power has impinged ever more on the Muslim world, resentment has grown, along with a more aggressive discourse that constitutes the U.S. as the antithesis of Islam and of religion in general. In that discourse, America becomes the Great Satan, a monstrous entity responsible for a global flood of impiety and profanation, as witnessed in the blatant sexuality and random violence of the popular culture it so happily (and profitably) exports.

I want to suggest not only that Mohammed Atta and his comrades understood America in these terms (that much is clear enough), but also that their view found expression in the targets they chose: the Pentagon and World Trade Towers, central emblems of American military and economic might. I also think the minimal armaments they carried – a few knives and box-cutters – have more than technical significance. Indeed, the assailants' technological impoverishment constitutes a sign to be read and may well have been intended as such.⁹

In effect, these men drew a stark contrast between themselves and those they attacked, dramatizing the differences between two ideal-types of society and culture. As men of unshakable faith, armed only with the most humble tools, they presented themselves as metonymic images of a people whose strength lies in their religion, to which all other concerns – economy, politics, technology, and the rest – are distinctly subordinated. The buildings against which they hurled themselves are likewise tropes for a people preoccupied with money, machines, and armies, but shockingly unconcerned with religion.

In their authors' intentions, the events of September 11 thus constituted an experiment for all to behold, testing two different types of society and two different types of power. To put it more precisely, they measured the relative power of two antithetical cultural formations, as seen from an Islamist perspective: Islam (+religion/-all else) vs. America (-religion/+all else), in a showdown encounter. The results were instantaneously relayed throughout the globe, thanks to the technology and communications network of the latter party.

Predictably, those results were read in different fashions, reflecting the predispositions of the readers, but many surely took the hijackers' success as a sign of God's favor.

In the U.S., September 11 was immediately associated to Pearl Harbor and condemned as a sneak attack perpetrated by cowards and villains. While hideously destructive, it was not a knock-out blow, but one that alerted a sleeping, peaceful giant to a terrible danger. Once roused, that giant could be counted on to marshal its forces and wage a relentless campaign to rid the world of this evil. The analogy has its points, particularly in its sense of a resilient America under attack, but it also has its problems. Chief of these, I think, is its disinterest in the attackers' intentions. In December 1941, the Japanese general staff meant to deliver a definitive first strike that would end the war with a single blow by crippling American military capacities. Those who planned and executed the attacks of September 11 can hardly have expected to do anything on that order.

Rather, as I have suggested, their goal was to make a point: to demonstrate that, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, they possessed a power infinitely superior to their adversary's and of an entirely different order. In contrast to the imperial Japanese, the Islamists designed their assault more for sign value than use value¹⁰. Their point was not so much to kill people, destroy buildings, and shatter defenses (although their results along these lines were hardly negligible), but to show the world how awesome was the form of power they – and they alone – possessed. From the perspective of those who executed the attacks, September 11 was meant to avoid the Japanese mistakes of 1941. Not Pearl Harbor: they were meant to be Hiroshima. That is to say, a spectacular event in which sign value and use value supported each other and were meant to display power that was not only overwhelming and decisive, but unprecedented and incomparable. Those who suffered such attacks were

presumably meant first to surrender and thereafter to refashion their culture after that of the victors.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Excerpted from Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). © 2002 by The University of Chicago. Reprinted with permission.

² The second copy to be recovered was found in the vehicle used by Nawaf Alhazmi before he boarded American Airlines Flight #77 in Washington, and the third at the crash site of United Airlines Flight #93 in Stony Creek Township, Pennsylvania. Facsimiles of the original Arabic holograph were made available by the FBI at <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel01/letter.htm>. Although press reports consistently referred to a five-page document, the FBI website reproduced only four, the first page of the original apparently having been withheld. Translation following the *Observer*, September 30, 2001, available at <http://www.observer.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,560773,00.html>. This translation was initially prepared for *The New York Times* by Capital Communications Group, a Washington-based international consulting firm and by Imad Musa, a translator for the firm.

³ Three authoritative oral traditions (*hadith*) are also introduced, always framed as words of the Prophet (§§23, 27, 28).

⁴ Sûra 9.12-14. Cf. the use of scripture in §30: "*When the confrontation begins, strike like champions who do not want to go back to this world. Shout, "Allahu Akbar," because this strikes fear in the hearts of the non-believers. God said: "Strike above the neck, and strike at all of their extremities."* The Quranic passage cited is Sûra 8.12-14, which reads as follows.

*When the Lord was revealing to the angels,
 "I am with you; so confirm the believers.
 I shall cast into the unbelievers' hearts
 Terror; so smite above the necks, and smite every finger of
 them!"*

*That, because they had made a breach
 with God and with His Messenger; and
 whosoever makes a breach with God and with
 His Messenger, surely God is terrible in retribution.
 That for you; therefore taste it; and
 That the chastisement of the Fire is for the unbelievers.*

The promise of chastisement by fire for unbelievers is especially ominous when set in homologic relation to the events of 9/11.

⁵ Qutb, *Milestones*, pp. 38-40. See the discussion of Shepard, "Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," pp. 12-15.

⁶ This is not to say their motives were exclusively religious. Anger over American foreign policy toward Palestine and Iraq, for instance, surely played some role in prompting the attacks of 9/11. Here, however, I would make two points: 1) Such considerations go completely unmentioned in the instructions text (perhaps because they are taken for granted); 2) In other texts where they do enter, the discourse itself conflates "religious" and "political" aspects, which can only be separated by an outside observer insensitive to their intimate interrelation. Thus, to pursue the example, "Palestine" and "Iraq" do not figure simply as nation-states and political entities. Rather, they are of concern precisely because they are Muslim nations or, more simply, part of "Islam" (*dar*

al-Islam, on the significance of which, see the discussion in Chapter Three of *Holy Terrors*).

⁷ This, of course, is a classic theme, treated not only in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, but in different ways and to different purposes also in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. Professional students of religion have often been a good deal more superficial in treating the issues raised by such troubling practices as collective suicide, spousal immolation, and clitoridectomy, where they can usually be counted on to smooth out the apparent contradiction between the ethical and the religious. Toward that end, scholars who harbor a distinctly non-academic reverence for their object of study can be counted on to deploy one of two favored arguments: a) It is ethnocentric to ignore or undervalue the profound significance these practices have in their proper cultural context (i.e., being religious, they must be good); and b) The perpetrators are frauds, hypocrites, dupes, or members of "cults" (i.e., being bad, they can't *really* be religious). In either case, the goal is the same and the project transparently apologetic.

⁸ For summary discussions of these and other related figures, see Ali Rahnama, ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books, 1994). Specifically on the Muslim Brotherhood, Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; 1st ed. 1969).

⁹ §21 of the instructions draws a related contrast between those whose strength is grounded in religious faith and those who depend on technology.

All of their equipment and gates and technology will not prevent, nor harm, except by God's will. The believers do not fear such things. The only ones that fear it are the allies of Satan, who are the brothers of the devil. They have become their allies, God save us, for fear is a great form of worship,

and the only one worthy of it is God. He is the only one who deserves it. He said in the verses: "This is only the Devil scaring his allies, who are fascinated with Western civilization, and have drunk the love [of the West] like they drink water [unclear] and have become afraid of their weak equipment, "so fear them not, and fear Me, if you are believers."

¹⁰ Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer's discussion of the theatricality of most religious-political violence, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 119-144.