

It's Not the Koran That Kills

Prof. Janusz Danecki, head of the Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Warsaw University, talks to Beata Błaszczyk.

Who were the people who attacked the World Trade Center Sept. 11? Is it possible to find something in Islam justifying suicide and the killing of innocent people?

They were ordinary terrorists who used Islam to achieve their own goals and to justify their actions. Their aim was to terrorize, to petrify—and that happened. Also, to destroy something detestable and fundamentally wrong in their eyes.

I'd like to focus on the way they use religion to justify their actions. They claim that their adversaries, the United States and the West, behave in exactly the same way towards the Muslim world. They kill innocent people in order to terrorize nations and societies. That's why they consider their actions to be a mere response and fully justified.

So "An eye for an eye..." Can this also be justified on religious grounds?

Well, their views are much more subtle. Osama bin Laden says, "We do not kill children or innocent people. We only kill fighters on a battlefield—firstly soldiers, secondly those who fight using money as their weapon. Taxpayers who financially support this system which is against us." Bearing this in mind we can say that the target on Sept. 11 was selected very carefully indeed and the effect was staggering. They managed to achieve exactly what they had intended. Shocking the world. Getting over it is going to be a slow and painstaking process.

It states in the Koran: "Unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine." (The Unbelievers; K 109:1-6). Doesn't that mean that unbelievers (non-Muslims) are not meant to be converted to Islam?

In classical Islam, all monotheists are considered to have the same faith. "The People of the Book,"—Jews and Christians are of the same religion as Muslims, though at some stage the former went astray, and in a way it's only their problem. That's not the case for today's fundamentalists, though. In their view, all three groups—Jews, Christians and Muslims—have abandoned the true faith. Thus, the criticism applies not only to the West, but also to most of the Muslim world, except of course the fundamentalists themselves. That's why there's a dichotomy in the world. On the one hand, we have the fundamentalists' world of true faith, and on the other the world which is entirely faithless. And the latter ought to be destroyed literally by all means, as all methods are justified.

Can they find a justification in the Koran?

Yes, pagans—and in their eyes we are all pagans—should be destroyed. The problem is that they are allowed to interpret Islam in their own way. Everybody is allowed to do that. There's no church guarding the orthodoxy, there's no clergy in the sense of hierarchy. When we use the word "clerics" in the Shi'a in fact we refer to experts on law and theology who are quite independent.



Deeper understanding of cross-cultural differences.
Prof. Janusz Danecki

And it has always been like this, since the very beginning of Islam (7th century AD). The terrorist idea itself appeared for the first time in 656 when a certain radical group declared that political disputes could be only settled by God, so they distanced themselves from the others/unbelievers, and declared that whoever disagreed with them ought to be killed. For two centuries they kept doing so.

Today's terrorist organizations often tend to use names derived from that movement. An Egyptian organization held responsible for the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat called itself *takfir wa-al-hijra*—accusing the others of being unbelievers and thus withdrawing. Leaving this ugly world only in order to get organized against the unbelievers. They did not kill Christians then, mind you. Only Muslims were considered unbelievers. So this idea is not new in Islam.

Although everyone has the right to interpret Islam in their own way, some interpretations undoubtedly become more popular. Which ones and why?

I would say two kinds of interpretation tend to gain more popularity. Into the first category fall those given by real academic authorities in the Muslim world. If an eminent Muslim scholar expresses his opinion (called *fatwa*), say on abortion, and justifies it, then such an opinion can be used by state authorities and even turned into a law. The second way we could call "charismatic." Being able to talk skillfully to people brings about acceptance. Osama bin Laden is one such talented speaker, and so are the leaders of the Lebanese Hizb Allah (God's Party) or Palestinian Hamas. They know how to capitalize on discontent, how to take advantage of people's difficult economic or social situation and set their minds onto a different cause—not always a noble one.

What is the relationship between those who planned the attacks and those who actually carried them out?

A letter found in the luggage of one of the suicide hijackers—thought to be the leader of that group—makes one instantly think of the Sufi (mystic) tradition of Islam. The master-disciple relationship was an element of utmost importance there. The disciple fully obeyed the master who could order the former to do practically anything, including walking barefoot across burning coals. In terrorist organizations this master-disciple relationship is heavily used. A similar mechanism is also used in some sects to make the members totally dependent upon their leader.

Do you think the hijackers thought of Paradise?

No, I don't, although the Koranic vision of Paradise must seem irresistible, especially to the people of the desert. The true believers "shall recline on jeweled couches face to face, and shall wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup of purest wine (that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason); with fruits of their own choice and fesh of fowls that they relish. And theirs shall be the dark-eyed houris, chaste as virgin pearls: a guerdon for their deeds." (K 56:6). The wrongdoers who persist in heinous sin "shall drink scalding water as the thirsty camel drinks" (K 56:55). The tradition of the Prophet has it that martyrs go straight to Paradise, but so do the righteous who die surrounded by their children and grandchildren. So there is no need to hurry.

It's easy to see that people who have nothing to lose could be recruited and brainwashed. Yet Osama bin Laden seems able to recruit young and well-educated Muslims disillusioned with the West.

The presence of numerous well-educated people is a phenomenon typical of all fundamentalisms. Take Jewish fundamentalism—most of the leading activists are very well-educated indeed. The same is true of Muslim fundamentalists. Most or maybe even all of those who killed themselves Sept. 11 had a university education. And I don't understand why from among such people it was possible to recruit terrorists. Furthermore, the two most outstanding theorists of Muslim fundamentalism—the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) and the Pakistani Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-79) were both well educated in the West.

After the Sept. 11 assault, the world suddenly remembered Samuel Huntington's 1996 book *Clash of Civilizations*. The 21st century is meant to witness such a clash. All groups, in their quest for identity, will focus on differences rather than similarities especially where their vital interests collide. A fulfilled prophecy?

First of all, we must not identify a group of fanatics with the civilization that has been around for one and a half thousand years. They were not representatives of that civilization. So in that sense Huntington's thesis does not apply to this situation. Thus it is not Islam as the arch-enemy of the West, but pseudo-religious fundamentalism, instrumentally citing religion, human poverty and tragedies in order to achieve its camouflaged political aims. However strongly I disagree with Huntington, there is one thing that must be said. In a way, it's possible to conjure up reality.

Something that has been said suddenly comes to life, begins to have a life of its own—only because it has been said, not because it's a fact. And it is very dangerous indeed. All of a sudden we are beginning to see a major clash of civilizations—when we see fierce-looking Muslims protesting all over the world against the American attack on Afghanistan. But Europeans and Americans are also protesting. More and more so. We don't seem to notice it, however, as it doesn't sit well with our theory.

There is, however, another danger that has to be taken into consideration. After the American attack, we are beginning to see in the Muslim world a kind of shift of attitude towards terrorists. Before they were perceived as a threat to everybody. Now public opinion is beginning to warm up to them, as they were the only ones who dared confront those dreadful Americans who are now killing innocent Afghans. That is their new way of thinking.

We hear the word *jihad* increasingly often. What is the actual definition?

As every Muslim has his own interpretation of Islam the same applies to *jihad* which can be understood in a variety of ways. This term—since the very beginning—has been used to justify so many things. *Jihad* ("intensified effort") in the Koran means firstly self-improvement, secondly defense. For mystics and ascetics their struggle with overwhelming passions and desires was also *jihad*. The primary sense of *jihad* I would thus consider defending Islam against the unbelievers. It did not mean "a holy war" as in Islam we do not have the Western dichotomy: *sacrum-profanum*. The situation changed in the 20th century. A campaign against illiteracy in Afghanistan was called *jihad*. During the Iranian-Iraqi war both sides were waging *jihad* labeling the enemy as infidels. The term was also used during the Kuwaiti-Iraqi war.

After Sept. 11 nothing will be the same. How do you understand this frequently quoted comment in the context of cross-cultural relations?

Interestingly, such conflicts often lead to an increase of interest in the Muslim world on the part of the West. That was the case in 1973 during the oil crisis, when it suddenly turned out that the Muslim world could have a powerful impact on us and our economy. We observed a tremendous increase in interest, both in academic and political circles, especially in the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and France. But somehow that interest did not get passed on to the general public. Possibly, it was due to the way the media operate. Regardless of the content, they seem to foster the already existing and well-ingrained views.

Now we see a similar increase in interest and that is very good. This process doesn't have an equivalent in the Muslim world as the West is known very well there. More and more people in the Western world are far less likely to condemn or attack the Muslim world without trying to understand it first. I'd like to believe that it will lead to a deeper understanding of our cross-cultural differences, and eventually to the Muslim world being treated less instrumentally by the West.

In a recent TV interview S. Huntington stated that what is happening now is not the clash between the Muslim world and the West, as most of the Muslim countries condemned terrorism, and that "Islam is religion of peace and moderation."