

American Muslim scholar declares: Terrorists are mass murderers, not martyrs

BY RICHARD SCHEININ San Jose Mercury News, Published Sunday, Sept. 16, 2001

Tuesday's terrorist attacks have saddened and maddened millions -- and raised questions for many about Islam. Speculation abounds that the hijackers were inspired by terrorists like Osama bin Laden, who teach that violent acts can pave the way to paradise.

But what does Islam really say about such matters? About jihad and martyrdom?

We asked Hamza Yusuf, an Islamic scholar in the East Bay, who said the attackers were "enemies of Islam." Not martyrs, but "mass murderers, pure and simple."

Yusuf, whose articles about Islam are published internationally, talked about the attacks, the hysteria that he fears could grip the United States, and the role that Muslims and others must play in opposing violence. "We've got to get to some deeper core values that are commonly shared," he said.

Q Why would anyone do what the hijackers did?

A Religious zealots of any creed are defeated people who lash out in desperation, and they often do horrific things. And if these people indeed are Arabs, Muslims, they're obviously very sick people and I can't even look at it in religious terms. It's politics, tragic politics. There's no Islamic justification for any of it. It's like some misguided Irish using Catholicism as an excuse for blowing up English people. They're not martyrs, it's as simple as that.

Q Because?

A You can't kill innocent people. There's no Islamic declaration of war against the United States. I think every Muslim country except Afghanistan has an embassy in this country. And in Islam, a country where you have embassies is not considered a belligerent country.

In Islam, the only wars that are permitted are between armies and they should engage on battlefields and engage nobly. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Do not kill women or children or non-combatants and do not kill old people or religious people," and he

mentioned priests, nuns and rabbis. And he said, ``Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees and do not poison the wells of your enemies."

The Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet, say that no one can punish with fire except the lord of fire. It's prohibited to burn anyone in Islam as a punishment. No one can grant these attackers any legitimacy. It was evil.

Q What role should American Muslims have in opposing this brand of violent Islam?

A I think that the Muslims -- and I really feel this strongly -- have to reject the discourse of anger. Because there is a lot of anger in the Muslim communities around the world about the oppressive conditions that many Muslims find themselves in. But we have to reject the discourse of anger and we have to move to a higher moral ground, recognizing that the desire to blame others leads to anger and eventually to wrath, neither of which are rungs on a spiritual ladder to God. It's times like these that we really need to become introspective.

The fact that there are any Muslims -- no matter how statistically insignificant their numbers -- who consider these acts to be religious acts is in and of itself shocking. And therefore we as Muslims have to ask the question, ``How is it that our religious leadership has failed to reach these people with the true message of Islam?" Because the acts of these criminals have indicted an entire religion in the hearts and minds of millions.

These people are so bankrupt that all they have to offer is destruction.

Q Why do some people regard the hijackers as martyrs?

A That's an abomination. These are mass murderers, pure and simple. It's like Christians in this country who blow up abortion clinics or kill abortion doctors. I don't think anyone in the Christian community, except a very extreme fringe, would condone that as an acceptable Christian response. In the same way, there's no Muslim who understands his religion at all who would condone this.

One of the worst crimes in Islam is brigandry -- highway robbery, or today we'd say armed robbery -- because it disrupts the sense of well-being and security among civilians.

Q Suicide bombers have cited a Koranic verse that says, ``Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord."

A That is meant for people who are legitimately defending the lands of Islam or fighting under legitimate state authority against a tyrannical leader. There is no vigilantism in Islam. Muslims believe in the authority of government.

Imam Malik, an early Islamic legal authority, said that 60 years of oppression under an unjust ruler is better than one hour of anarchy.

Q Then why is there such strong support in parts of the world for the attacks?

A Because we're dealing in an age of ignorance and an age of anomie, the loss of social order. And people are very confused and they're impoverished. What Americans are feeling now, this has been business as usual for Lebanese people, Palestinian people, Bosnian people.

Q What about Israeli people?

A Certainly the fear element is there for Israeli people -- that's true, and the terror that they've felt. And there are still a lot of Jewish people alive who remember the fear and terror of what happened in Europe, so that's not far from people's memories.

It seems at some point, the cycles of violence have to stop. It's a type of insanity, especially when we're dealing with nuclear power. People are saying that this was an attack on civilization -- and that is exactly the point. And I think the question we all have to ask is whether indiscriminate retaliation is going to help preserve civilization.

The perpetrators of this and, really, all acts of terror are people who hate too much. There's a verse in the Koran that says do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Being just is closer to piety.

The evil of wrath is that justice and mercy are lost.

Q How do you explain Palestinians and others celebrating the attacks in the streets?

A When you see ignorant people in the streets, rejoicing -- the Prophet condemned it. It's rejoicing at the calamities of your enemies, and Islam prohibits that.

They do have a lot of anger toward America, because America produces much of Israel's military hardware and so many American tax dollars go to support Israel. You have a lot of animosity in the Arab world. But the vast majority of Arabs are horrified by what's happened.

Q The concept of jihad has been widely used to justify violence.

A Jihad means struggle. The Prophet said the greatest jihad is the struggle of a man against his own evil influences. It also refers to what Christians call a "just war," which is fought against tyranny or oppression -- but under a legitimate state authority.

Q What is the Arabic word for martyr?

A Shaheed. It means witness. The martyr is the one who witnesses the truth and gives his life for it. There are people in this country like Martin Luther King who would be considered a martyr for his cause.

Also, if your home, your family, your property or your land or religion is threatened, then you may defend it with your life. That person is a martyr. But so is anybody who dies of terminal illness; it's a martyr's death. Because it's such a purification that whatever wrongs they once did, they're now in a state of purity.

And the greatest martyr in the eyes of God is the one who stands in the presence of a tyrant and speaks the truth and is killed for it. He is martyred for his tongue.

Q What does Islam say about suicide?

A Suicide is haram in Islam. It's prohibited, like a mortal sin. And murder is haram. And to kill civilians is murder.

Q What is a martyr's reward?

A The Prophet said that a martyr who dies doesn't have a reckoning on the Day of Judgment. It's an act through which he is forgiven. But the Prophet also said that there are people who kill in the name of Islam and go to hell. And when he was asked why, he said, "Because they weren't fighting truly for the sake of God."

If there are any martyrs in this affair it would certainly be those brave firefighters and police that went in there to save human lives and in that process lost their own.

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