

JIHAD

By Lew Scudder

Jihad is the vehicle (or the ideological justification) for the early Muslim conquests which ended in dismantling the "Christian" Byzantine Empire and the Zoroastrian Sassanian Empire of Persia. It remained an instrument of the Muslim state all the way through the days of the Ottoman Empire (that is, down to 1923). The principle is that the Muslim state (personified in its prince or Imam or Caliph) has a universal mandate to extend to all humanity the benefits of Islam and its saving virtues. Conquests, therefore, were known as "Openings Up" [futuhat] with the idea of liberation from the closed doors of ignorance and darkness. When the Muslims encounter political opposition to this mission, they have the communal obligation to launch war against that opposition. Under this doctrine, therefore, the world is divided into two spheres -- the House of Peace (or the House of Islam) and the House of War.

There's no real way around this basic teaching of Islam. It's there and highly developed in the basic texts. The primary definition of Jihad is military and political. While it is not one of the Five Pillars (usually) it is known by Islamic jurisprudence as a "fard-kifayah" [a religious duty imposed in proportion to the ability of the community to fulfill it when appropriate or feasible].

We need to see this within its historical setting, however. Political institutions of the pre-modern period existed to make war. Empires and kingdoms existed to expand. Limits were set by a changeable balance of power. This was understood and considered natural. It was accepted. The trick was to play the game successfully. Failure meant absorption into the domain of the winner. The history of the Balkans is a good example.

Another example is the western Crusades during their heyday. And, make no mistake about it, western imperialism was an extension of the Crusades as were our forefathers in modern Christian missions. But, their respective contexts, each of these things which we may now disclaim and even abhor, were quite acceptable. Their justification lay in the ability of the powerful to maintain their control. When they could no longer do so, the game came to an end. *Finito la musica.*

Following the First World War Ataturk, with a swipe of his pen, abolished the Caliphate (the personification of the greater Muslim political identity) and the Muslim empire vanished over night with traumatic consequences that are still being played out. Many things were in a rapid state of flux. We were being ushered into the global age. European empires entered into their final two decades of existence (everything was virtually over by 1947). The ideas -- articulated by our own American President, Woodrow Wilson -- were growing that nations must limit their greed for land and dominion, that multi-national empires are a thing of the past, that we must begin to speak about the world in terms of a "family of nations," that the little guy has a right to say what he/she wants to be (the principle of self-determination), and that war was an illegitimate instrument of foreign policy except in self-defense.

It is interesting that these ideas of Wilson's cut no ice with either the French or British power brokers of the post-war peace, but they did eventually become enshrined in the charter of the League of Nations (also a dream Wilson had). And it was the League of Nations which presided over dismantling western empires in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The last gasp of the old order was the Fascist onslaught of the '30s and '40s. (The irony is that their surviving legacy is the state of Israel, the darling of our western democracies!) The failure of Fascism led to reformulating the idea of the League into the broader idea of the United Nations. In effect, Jihad, or western Holy War, or the "white man's burden", or whatever you want to call it became a thing of the past. Its conventional formulation was politically and morally debunked and eschewed ... for the most part.

It is at this point that Muslim thinkers have had to do some serious rethinking of their own about Jihad. This, of course, is a good thing by-and-large. To find roots for modern ideas, they've gone back to Islam's very elitist mystic tradition. Jihad (or, as the mystics styled it, the "Greater Jihad" because some of them were quite enthusiastic participants in the "lesser" one) is the individual's spiritual struggle against the temptations of unbelief and hypocrisy. The inner spiritual struggle is to achieve purity of will, thought and action so as to be blessed with union with God and become his friend (the Arabic term is "waliyy"). The implication, of course, is that this inner Jihad will yield a person who is also the champion of the underdog and the persecuted. Such a person will physically fight for justice and truth. While this is a laudable and positive interpretation of the idea, we have to bear in mind that its revival and limited popularization now is a modern exercise in Islamic apologetics. The

classical idea still remains very much in circulation.

Most of the references in the Qur'an refer to Jihad as a physical struggle within the context of Arab society in Mecca and Madinah (often in terms of principled resistance) against unbelievers and hypocrites. But, in this same context, there are also references to those "people of the Book" (primarily the powerful Jewish tribes of Madinah) who refused to acknowledge the hegemony of the Islamic dispensation. Implicit in this is the Muslim reaction against being subject to any system which asserts equality between Islam and other religions or (heaven forefend!) no religion at all ... secularism. This is wrong in principle and misguided. Jihad also remains a Muslim way of articulating the broad idea of self-defense against a non-Muslim aggressor.

One of the things that the old idea of Jihad had that should be given wider circulation is the principle of chivalry. That is, from the earliest days of the Islamic conquests, the Caliph 'Umar (2nd successor to the Prophet Muhammad) instructed his troops not to lay a hand on innocents and noncombatants. Women and children, in particular, were excluded as targets of violent action. Religious institutions and clergy were also to be shielded, their sanctity and sanctuary honored. The European medieval code of chivalry derives directly from this Islamic model, and it has been enshrined in the Geneva Conventions. Violation of this code by contemporary Islamist terrorist groups is repugnant to Muslims in general.

Furthermore, although a Muslim combatant in a Jihad action is expected to throw himself fully into the fray, and may expect God's approval for his sacrifice if he should die, he is not to commit suicide deliberately. That little wrinkle developed within Islam in the 12th century Syrian and Persian Isma'ili group given the sarcastic name by their opponents of "Hashishiyyun" (whence we get our word "assassins"). The Assassins were sent out by their leader on suicide missions in the course of which they were expected to die. Muslims, in general, were horrified by the idea and the Assassins gradually died out in the later middle ages. (I believe it was the Moghuls, more fanatic even than themselves, who finally did them in.) The idea they embodied, however, continued in remembrance, and has been revived in modern times both by Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine and (reportedly, although he has denied it) by 'Usama Bin-Ladin.

One of the things that Bin-Ladin has done that is definitely a break with and a deviation from mainline Islam (both Sunni and Shi'ite) has been to declare that modern day Christianity and Judaism is not the same as that which existed in the Prophet's day and for which the Prophet (and the Qur'an) enjoined tolerance. Bin-Ladin has announced that shedding Christian and Jewish blood is condoned. This springs out of a new hermeneutic that Islamists in general have evolved to deal with the complexities of modern times, and that has come to the conclusion that contemporary Christianity is actually a cleverly convoluted form of polytheism, and Judaism is an outright revolt against Moses. They are, indeed, infidels. If this is the case, the conclusion follows that members of these religions are no longer "People of the Book" and cannot enjoy the status of "patronized people." This evolution is very unsettling, not least of all for the indigenous Christians of the Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere, since it makes them targets (as we've seen happen in Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt and Lebanon). Again, the mainstream of Islam in both its tributary types, will have nothing to do with this modern interpretation, and considers the conclusions (and actions stemming from them) repugnant.

(It is true that at least certain branches of neo-fundamentalist Islam have grown out of movements that, prior to 1967, were actually Marxist. This, at least, is certainly true of Hizb-Allah in Lebanon. They have re-tooled their ideology but retained a good deal of their earlier methodology. I have no data to support it, but I would not be surprised to discover that both Hamas and Islamic Jihad have similar roots in the PDF and PFLP, the Marxist branches of the Palestinian resistance movement.)

Bin-Ladin has not violated Islamic principles by declaring Jihad as such. What he has done is violate Islamic principles concerning the CONDUCT of Jihad. He has violated the sanctity of the innocent bystander and particularly of women and children. He has violated the prohibition against suicide. And he is grossly misguided in targeting Christians and Jews because of their respective religions.

We must remember that when the American Embassies in East Africa were bombed, there was not the massive outcry against the acts in the Muslim world that we heard after the New York disaster. In Tanzania and Kenya, these were political institutions and symbols; in theory, the people in them were engaged in prospering the political objectives for which they stood. On "Black Tuesday," had only the

Pentagon been hit, the response would have been much the same. What qualitatively changed the game in Muslim eyes was the murderous and massive strike against the Twin Towers in New York. That cannot be excused in Islamic terms without a great deal of torturous and unconvincing double talk.

The dialogue we must have with Muslims is not going to be an easy one, and we should not politely paper over the real issues. People from both our Christian tradition and the Muslim tradition need to resolve together that they will tackle the hard issues and not leave them to be decided by the fanatics in our midst -- our Jerry Fallwels and 'Usama Bin-Ladins.