

The war for Islam

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Osama bin Laden may go down in history not only as the murderous criminal who declared holy war on the United States, but also as a radical figure in what has come to be called the Islamic Reformation--the epic struggle to define the faith of over a billion people

By Reza Aslan | September 10, 2006

ON JULY 6TH, 2005, in an unprecedented display of intersectarian collaboration, 170 of the world's leading Muslim clerics and scholars gathered in Amman, Jordan, to issue a joint fatwa, or legal ruling, denouncing all acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam.

This belated attempt by the traditional clerical institutions to assert some measure of influence and authority over the world's Muslims was surely one of the most interesting developments in what has become an epic battle to define the faith and practice of over a billion people. Never before in the history of Islam had representatives of every major sect and school of law assembled as a single body, much less come to terms on issues of mutual concern.

Yet what made the Amman declaration so remarkable was not its condemnation of terrorism--since Sept. 11, 2001, similar statements have been issued by countless Muslim organizations throughout the world, despite perceptions to the contrary in the West. Rather, it was the inclusion of an all-encompassing fatwa reminding Muslims that only those who have dedicated a lifetime of study to the traditional Islamic sciences--in other words, the clerics themselves--could issue a fatwa in the first place.

This statement was a deliberate attempt to strip Islamic militants like Osama bin Laden of their self-proclaimed authority to speak for the world's 1.3 billion Muslims.

But if these clerics thought they could exert their authority over the militants, they were mistaken. The following day, July 7, four young British Muslims obliterated themselves and 52 bus and tube passengers during the height of rush hour. The London bombers, like the perpetrators of similar attacks in Madrid, New York, Tunisia, Turkey, Casablanca, Riyadh, Bali, Egypt, and, most dramatically, Iraq, believed they were heeding bin Laden's call for global jihad.

No wonder, then, that since 9/11 bin Laden has taken on an almost mythic stature in the world's imagination as the undisputed leader of a unified global network of Islamic terrorism (more properly termed "jihadism"). Indeed, in President Bush's mind, bin Laden is a modern-day Hitler or Lenin. But in the minds of many scholars of Islam and observers of the Muslim world, bin Laden is not only a murderous criminal; he has transformed himself into one of the principal figures of what many now call "the Islamic Reformation."

Obviously the term "reformation" has certain unavoidable Christian and European connotations that are simply not applicable to the complex sociopolitical conflicts plaguing much of the Arab and Muslim world. And any comparison of people and events in the 16th century to those of the 21st century must come with the caveat that historical analogies are never simple and should be handled with care. But the Christian Reformation, it should be remembered, was, above all else, an argument over who has the authority to define faith: the individual or the institution. In many ways, this same argument is now taking place within Islam, with similarly violent consequences.

Despite common perception in Europe and the United States, bin Laden's primary target is neither Christians nor Jews (both of whom are referred to by Al Qaeda as "the far enemy") but rather Islam's traditional clerical institutions along with those hundreds of millions of Muslims who do not share his puritanical worldview ("the near enemy") and who, as a consequence, make up the overwhelming majority of Al Qaeda's victims.

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To be sure, unlike Christianity, Islam has never had anything like a "Muslim pope" or a "Muslim Vatican." Religious authority in Islam is not centralized within a single individual or institution; rather, it is scattered among a host of exceedingly powerful clerical institutions and schools of law.

This authority, it must be understood, is self-conferred, not divinely ordained. Like a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim cleric is a scholar, not a priest. His judgment on a particular issue is respected and followed not because it carries the authority of God, but because the cleric's scholarship is supposed to grant him deeper insight into what God desires of humanity.

Consequently, for 1,400 years Islam's clerical institutions have managed to maintain their monopoly over religious interpretation by maintaining a monopoly over religious learning.

That is no longer the case. The last century has witnessed dramatic increases in literacy and education throughout the Arab and Muslim world, giving both Muslim men and women unprecedented access to new ideas and sources of knowledge. The result has been a steady erosion in the religious authority of Islam's traditional clerical institutions. After all, most Muslims no longer need go to a mosque to hear the words of God; they can experience the Koran for themselves, in their own homes, among their own friends, and increasingly, in their own languages.

Over the last century, the Koran has been translated into more languages than in the 14 centuries previous. Until recently, some 90 percent of the world's Muslims, for whom Arabic is not a primary language, had to depend on their clerical leaders to define the meaning and message of the Koran. Now, as more and more Muslim laity, and especially Muslim women, are studying the Koran for themselves, they are increasingly brushing aside centuries of traditionalist, male-dominated, and often misogynistic, clerical interpretation in favor of a highly individualized and more gender-neutral reading of Islam. By seizing the power of interpretation from the iron grip of the clerical institutions, these individuals are not only actively reinterpreting Islam according to their own evolving needs, they are shaping the future of this rapidly expanding and deeply fractured faith.

To see how this radical "individualization" of the Muslim world is affecting traditional notions of religious authority, one only need visit the magnificent city of Cairo, the cultural capital of the Muslim world. For more than a millennium, Cairo's famed Al-Azhar University has served as the center of Islamic scholarship. Within its hallowed walls, generations of male scriptural scholars (the ulama) have labored to construct a comprehensive code of conduct, called the shariah, meant to regulate every aspect of the believer's life. There was a time when Muslims from all over the world consulted Al-Azhar's revered scholars about everything from how to pray properly to how to properly dispose of fingernail clippings. No longer.

Today, if a Muslim wants legal or spiritual advice on how to live a righteous life, he or she is just as likely to pass over the antiquated scholarship of Al-Azhar for the televised broadcasts of the wildly popular Egyptian televangelist Amr Khaled, who is not a cleric and who has never studied Islam or Islamic law in any official capacity. Nevertheless, through his weekly television program, in which he dispenses his sage advice on religious and legal matters to tens of millions of Muslims throughout the world—from Detroit to Jakarta—Amr Khaled has utterly usurped the role traditionally reserved for Islam's clerical class.

And he is not alone. The Internet—whose role in the Islamic Reformation clearly parallels that of the printing press in the Christian Reformation—has now made it possible for many Muslims to draw upon the opinions of not only their own clerical leaders, but also of a host of Muslim activists and academics who are propounding fresh and innovative interpretations of Islam.

Fifty years ago, if a Muslim in, say, Malaysia, wanted a legal ruling on a disputed topic, he had access only to the religious opinion of his neighborhood cleric, whose word, at least to his followers, was essentially law. Now, that Muslim can troll the vast databases of fatwa-online.com or Islamonline.net, both of which provide ready-made fatwas on every question imaginable. He can send an e-mail to Amr Khaled (amrkhaled.net), or to Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (sistani.org), or to any number of Muslim scholars—clerics and nonclerics alike—who are more than happy to spread their influence beyond their local communities. And because no centralized religious authority exists in Islam to determine whose opinion is sound and whose is not, Muslims can simply follow whichever fatwa they like best.

Welcome to the Islamic Reformation.

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Of course, much as the Christian Reformation ushered in multiple, often conflicting, and sometimes baffling interpretations of Christianity, so has the Islamic Reformation created a number of wildly divergent and competing interpretations of Islam. Perhaps it is inevitable that, as religious authority passes from institutions to individuals, there will be men and women whose radical reinterpretations of religion will be fueled by their extreme social and political agendas.

It is in this sense that Osama bin Laden can be viewed as one of the Islamic Reformation's most influential figures. In fact, generations from now, when historians look back on this tumultuous time, they may compare bin Laden not to Lenin or Hitler, but rather to the so-called reformation radicals of Christianity—men like Thomas Muntzer, Jacob Hutter, Hans Hut, or even Martin Luther—who pushed the principle of religious individualism and militant anticlericalism to its terrifying limits.

Like his 16th-century Christian counterparts, bin Laden is concerned above all else with the purification of his own

religion. Al-Qaeda is, after all, a puritanical movement whose members consider themselves the only true believers, and believe all other Muslims are hypocrites, impostors, and apostates who must be convinced of their folly or abandoned to their horrible fate.

Bin Laden has shown he is willing to use any means necessary to purify Islam of what he considers to be its adulteration at the hands of the clerical establishment. While his tactics are immoral and horrifying, his justification for the use of violence is not so different than that used by reformation radicals like Martin Luther, who defended the massacre of his Protestant opponents by claiming that "in such a war, it is Christian and an act of love to strangle the enemies confidently, to rob, to burn, and do all that is harmful until they are overcome."

But what most connects bin Laden and the Reformation radicals of the 16th century is his deliberate attempt to seize for himself the powers traditionally reserved for the institutional authorities of his religion. Luther challenged the papacy's right to be the sole interpreter of the Scripture; bin Laden challenges the right of the clerical establishment to be the sole interpreters of Islamic law. That is why he repeatedly issues his own fatwas, despite the fact that, as the Amman declaration sought to remind Muslims, only a cleric affiliated with one of Islam's recognized schools of law has the authority to do so.

Even more striking is bin Laden's fundamental reinterpretation of the Koranic concept of jihad. What was once considered a collective duty waged solely under the command of a qualified clerical authority, has, in bin Laden's hands, become a radically individualistic and violent obligation totally divorced from any institutional power. In short, bin Laden's vision of Islam is one that is devoid of institutional control, where anyone can issue a fatwa and anyone can declare jihad.

It is this conscious recasting of religious authority that has made bin Laden so appealing to those Muslims, especially in Europe, whose sense of social, economic, or religious alienation from their own communities make them yearn for alternative sources of leadership. In his speeches and writings, bin Laden warns these disaffected Muslims not to listen to their own clerics, whom he considers incapable of addressing their needs. In fact, he claims that following the leadership of these "takfiri," or "apostate" clerical authorities (by which he means those who disagree with his interpretation of Islam), is "tantamount to worshipping [them] rather than God." He then defiantly takes upon himself the duty traditionally reserved for Islam's clerical class of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong."

It is a clever manipulative trick: convince Muslims to stop obeying their clerical authorities, while taking upon yourself their traditional clerical duties.

The struggle to define religious faith, as we know from Christian history, can be a chaotic and bloody affair. And the Islamic Reformation has some way to go before it is resolved. It may be too early to speculate how much bin Laden's radical individualism will influence Islam in the coming years. But it is important to note that bin Laden's voice is but one among the chorus of voices clamoring to define the Islamic Reformation.

There are millions of individuals who, by seizing powers of interpretation for themselves, are developing new and innovative interpretations of Islam: some promoting peace and tolerance, others promoting bigotry and puritanism. Who will win this war for the future of the Islamic faith remains to be seen. But once begun, the struggle cannot be stopped.

Reza Aslan is a scholar of religions and the author of "No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam" (Random House). ■