

Islam Packet

Note: This document comprises five articles from different sources

Article 1

Islam on the Issue of Violence

Source of this document: <http://www.beliefnet.com>

Save a Life, Save All Humanity--Take a Life, Kill All Humanity What the Islamic scriptures really say about jihad and violence.

For years Islamic terrorists have justified their actions as being compelled by their faith. Osama Bin Laden reportedly thanked Allah when he heard the news of this week's attack. Other terrorist groups invoke Islam as well. Hezbollah, the name of one militant group, is the Arabic word for Party of God; Hamas is the Islamic Resistance Movement.

Are the terrorists who cite the Qur'an distorting the spirit of the religion or depicting its emphasis accurately? Here are several of the Qur'an passages most frequently cited, and analysis from Islamic scholars.

On Jihad or "Holy War"

Chapter 2, verse 190: Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors.

This portion of the Qur'an was written in about 606 C.E., when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were under attack in the city of Medinah, says [Imam Yahya Hendi](#), a Qur'anic scholar who is the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University. There, they had established their own state. But various coalitions of non-Muslim tribes--including Christians, Jews, atheists and animists--continued to go to war with them. This portion of the Qur'an explains their reasoning behind striking back.

The passage actually refers to a defensive war. "You fight back. You go as far as it takes to stop the aggression but you do not go beyond that. So if you have to, you go as far as fighting verbally to get someone out of your home--but you don't shoot him after he is out. You don't keep going on with it--only if you are attacked, if there is an oppression applied to you. The idea is that justice prevails. You don't fight because you enjoy fighting, but because there is an oppression.

"It could be military force or [in today's world] it could be media force, writing against you. But when the hostilities are over and the enemy offers a peace treaty, you should submit. Muslims are obliged to submit to a peace treaty offered by the enemy. You don't keep fighting."

Al-Hajj Talib 'Abdur-Rashid, imam of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in Harlem, says the word jihad has its origin in the verb jahada which means to struggle, to fight. The word has a few different connotations, since struggle can occur on several levels.

"Muslims understand these levels based not only on the words of Allah in the Qur'an, but also on the authentic statements of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in our oral traditions, preserved as hadith," he says. According to 'Abdur-Rashid, there are three levels of jihad:

Personal Jihad: The most excellent jihad is that of the soul. This jihad, called the Jihadun-Nafs, is the intimate struggle to purify the soul of satanic influence--both subtle and overt. It is the struggle to cleanse one's spirit of sin. This is the most important level of jihad.

Verbal Jihad: On another occasion, the Prophet said, "The most excellent jihad is the speaking of truth in the face of a tyrant." He encouraged raising one's voice in the name of Allah on behalf of justice.

Physical Jihad: This is combat waged in defense of Muslims against oppression and transgression by the enemies of Allah, Islam and Muslims. We are commanded by Allah to lead peaceful lives and not transgress against anyone, but also to defend ourselves against oppression by "fighting against those who fight against us." This "jihad with the hand" is the aspect of jihad that has been so profoundly misunderstood in today's world.

On Non-Muslims

Chapter 2, verse 256: Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.

This passage has been cited to justify expelling non-Muslims from Muslim countries. But Imam Hendi says that not only does the Qur'an avoid any such suggestion, it even prohibits aggressive efforts to convert. "No Muslim is allowed to go out and force people to become Muslim. In the early days of Islam, Jews came to Islam and had younger children and asked Muhammad if they could force Islam on their children because they are younger. This verse [which was] revealed to him says that there can be no compulsion on other religions. This is very clear.

"I have had people come to my office and say they wanted to convert to Islam. I talked to them and it turned out they just weren't happy in their own faiths. So I said, no, go back to your own faith."

What's more, fundamentalist Muslims seldom site the passages of the Qur'an which are quite religious pluralistic. For instance, chapter 2, verse 46, says: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).'"

People of the Book is the term Muslims use to refer to Jews and Christians. "This is the most-viewed verse in terms of how we talk to non-Muslims. We have common ground between us and them," says Imam Hendi.

On Martyrdom:

Chapter 3, verse 169: 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.

Chapter 3, verse 172: Of those who answered the call of Allah and the Messenger, even after being wounded, those who do right and refrain from wrong have a great reward."

Does Islam have a special emphasis on martyrdom? Those who believe so often look at these verses. Imam Hendi says there is, indeed, a special place for those who die in the service of God, though that service needs to be of a different sort than that provided by terrorists. "Suppose I'm on the pulpit teaching and giving my sermon," says Imam Hendi. "If someone shoots me because of what I'm saying about God, the Qur'an says I'm not really dead because I'm with God. If I'm feeding the poor, and calling for justice, I can't be called dead. My soul is alive and God sustains me."

"If you are a teacher in a school and you die while teaching, you are a martyr. If you die while doing a service for people, you are a martyr. If I am traveling on American Airlines 700 going to London for a conference or to learn something, if that plane, God forbid, crashes, I am a martyr. Travelers for learning are martyrs.

So to claim martyr status, all terrorists have to do is convince themselves that they are fighting for "justice," which is, of course, highly subjective. "They say that America is the leader of injustice worldwide because of the embargo against Afghanistan, and the thousands of people suffering in Iraq. Some people think America has a double standard when it comes to the Middle East and Israel. [Terrorists] think if they hurt Americans, they serve the cause of justice. They use these verses," says Imam Hendi.

But the Qur'an has just as many passages describing how martyrdom cannot cause harm to others. "The prophet Muhammad said, 'Do not attack a temple a church, a synagogue. Do not bring a tree or a plant down. Do not harm a

horse or a camel. He went on and on in detail about what Muslims cannot do."

On Terrorism and Violence

Obviously the Qur'an doesn't condone terrorism, though Muhammed was the leader of a military force and therefore used violence. "In the West," writes scholar Karen Armstrong in her book, *Muhammad*, "we often imagine Muhammad as a warlord, brandishing his sword in order to impose Islam on a reluctant world by force of arms. The reality was quite different. Muhammad and the first Muslims were fighting for their lives, and they had also undertaken a project in which violence was inevitable."

It is true, she says, that unlike Christianity, Islam's leader was not a pacifist. "Islam fight tyranny and injustice. A Muslim may feel that he has a sacred duty to champion the weak and the oppressed," she writes. "Fighting and warfare might sometimes be necessary, but it was only a minor part of the whole jihad or struggle. A well-known tradition (hadith) has Muhammad say on returning from a battle, 'We return from the little jihad to the greater jihad,' the more difficult and crucial effort to conquer the forces of evil in oneself and in one's own society in all the details of daily life."

While there are passages in the Qur'an, like the Old Testament of the Bible, that celebrate military victory, the overall gestalt of the Qur'an promotes a more restrained view. Chapter 5, verse 32, for instance, states: *On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person--unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land--it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.*

That passages places a great value on the sanctity of a single life. "If you kill one person it's as if you kill all humanity," says Imam Hendi.

Indeed, Hendi says, the Qur'an goes one step further in chapter 8, verse 61, "But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah."

Article 2

The following document was published at the time of the second attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001

Source of this document: <http://www.beliefnet.com>

Why We Ask 'Why?'

A Muslim specialist says our acquaintance with Islam has just begun, and at the wrong place

John Esposito, raised a Roman Catholic in Brooklyn, New York, is the director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. He spoke to Beliefnet Producer Paul O'Donnell after the attacks on New York and Washington.

How did Islam get this reputation for violence?

Americans have very little background about Muslims. Historically, Muslims were not visible in this country. Academically, too, Islam was not put with other [monotheistic] faiths, but with Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism. It was foreign. So you end up with generalizations. It's like if all you see is headlines about the Mafia, all Italians all become Mafia.

When the American public first experienced Islam, then, it was as the oil embargo in the early 1970s, and the Iranian revolution in 1979, both of which were experienced as threats. The Iranian revolution was seen not in a political context, but as Islamic, as the work of the ayatollahs. And Ronald Reagan and later Dan Quayle put radical Islamic action beside the Soviets as the world's great evils.

How do these people, Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, fit into the larger picture of Islam?

Let me ask, how do Christian fundamentalists who blow up clinics fit into a Christian context? How does someone like Baruch Goldstein, who shot Muslim worshipers inside the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994—how did he fit

into the Jewish context? The analogies are many: when we have David Koresh, whose group died at Waco, or when Mr. Rabin was assassinated, Americans frame it as extremism. The media talk about Christian cults, for instance. This [recent attack] is not a legitimate act by a resistance movement.

What do you think of the Muslim response to the attack?

What's different from past events is how major Muslim leaders are condemning it. The *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie [after his novel "Satanic Verses" was regarded as blasphemous] brought more mixed reactions. They created a gray area. Now the Muslim mainstream is going on the record as saying this is not only irrational but unislamic. They are setting the stage for the possibility that this turns out to be a Muslim terrorist. They want to distance themselves.

On the other hand, there were pictures of people rejoicing in [the West Bank city of] Nablus.

The average American might not know that in the past few weeks the town has been surrounded by the Israeli military. So for us, again, we don't have the context. For the residents there, this comes in the context of an Israeli siege, for which they blame the United States in part for its support of Israel with American weapons.

So we look and say, "what's the basis for this?" Bin Laden plays off these situations, where you have a political and social context where people have been driven to the edge. Bulldozed homes, no electricity and water--those youth are radicalized by all that.

Is there anything in Islam itself that promotes violence?

Any Muslim will be offended that Islam is seen as more violent than either Judaism or Christianity. Read your Hebrew Bible, the conquests of Judaism. In Christianity you have the crusades. Both have a holy war tradition. All three suffer from fact that this notion of just war can be manipulated by extremists.

In her recent history of Islam, Karen Armstrong says that in an Islamic understanding, "politics was...what Christians would call a sacrament," and she refers to the Muslims' "sacralization of history."

Judaism and Christianity are also based on sacred history. One sees history not just as human made and guided but divinely guided. The very rationale for the creation of Israel has been in terms of their tradition, their history, their sacred history. Many images have been pulled from Exodus, and the great sacred stories of the past. When you have three monotheistic faiths pulling from the same history, you get flashpoints.

You mention the Crusades, which Christianity fought in the Middle Ages. Do religions simply have violent phases?

When you talk about religion and violence, you have to look at the political and economic violence that occurred around it. Politics and economics cause violence, which then gets legitimized by religious ideas. Not that there aren't conflicts are not narrowly religious, but many battles that are actually for land or nationhood are framed religiously. For instance, the situation in Bosnia took on that strong religious dimension.

In Christianity, martyrs are passive--victims thrown to the lions or put to the sword. These suicide missions strike one as the opposite--are they representative of Islamic martyrdom?

One expert on TV said "This [attack] has religious markings" because of the suicides. People willing to die for what they believe in--we used to call that patriotism. We've become so secular that we can only understand giving your life as a religious act.

But this kind of martyrdom exists in Christianity--to fight and die what you believe in. And when we saw Iran and Islamic as a threat, we celebrated the mujahedeen Pakistan and their willingness to die.

Where does the Muslim community in America go from here?

From almost within minutes, they have come out as American citizens, not just as Muslims, to say these attacks are unacceptable. Don't rush to judgment, they are saying, but if it turns out to be Muslim, this is not what Islam is about.

What about long term?

It's going to take a while for us to recognize that Muslims are our neighbors, our fellow citizens. Muslims have been not visible, but that's changing. Muslims are now second, third and fourth generation immigrants. They aren't foreigners. But it's only beginning to percolate into our consciousness, and Muslims themselves are just now starting to address these issues. Where do I send my kids to school, where do I live? How do I preserve my identity as a minority but participate fully as an American?

Many fear there's no way of dealing with the terrorists. You hear things like, "They don't see violence the same way we do." There is almost a despair that no matter what we do, there's no way of stopping the violence.

This is really risky stuff. We don't sufficiently understand of the nature of terrorism. We react as if it's all mindless. That makes it easier for us. We say, the only thing to do is go up and drop bombs and antiseptically kill them. It's all right, as long as we do it rationally.

You can't stop the crazies. But unless you wind up addressing the injustices in Palestine and Israel in way that confirms Israel's right to exist and the right of Palestinians to a state and the right to live peacefully, you'll have kids growing up in this polarized view of the world.

The terrorists know how to exploit this situation. What Saddam did is the same. To get popular support, he played the cards of colonialism, of American exploitation, of the Palestinians. Bin Laden does the same thing. If you listen to his statements, they are rationally argued. But then when he draws his conclusions, that's when he goes wrong.

Article 3: Comparing the Holy Books of Christianity and Islam

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In the Beginning, There Were the Holy Books

The Bible and the Qur'an both reveal the word of God. Both speak of prophets, redemption, heaven and hell. So why the violence?

Searching the sacred texts for answers

Kenneth L. Woodward

He was a pious family man, a trader from Mecca who regularly retreated into the hills above the city to fast and pray. In his 40th year, while he was praying in a cave on Mount Hira, the angel Gabriel spoke to him, saying, "Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God," and commanded him to "Recite!" Muhammad protested that he could not--after all, he was not gifted like the traditional tribal bards of Arabia. Then, according to this tradition, the angel squeezed him so violently that Muhammad thought he'd die. Again Gabriel ordered him to recite, and from his lips came the first verses of what eventually became the Qur'an, regarded as the eternal words of God himself by some 1.3 billion Muslims around the world.

Until that moment, 13 centuries ago, the Arabs were mostly polytheists, worshiping tribal deities. They had no sacred history linking them to one universal god, like other Middle Eastern peoples. They had no sacred text to live by, like the Bible; no sacred language, as Hebrew is to Jews and Sanskrit is to Hindus. Above all, they had no prophet sent to them by God, as Jews and Christians could boast.

Muhammad and the words that he recited until his death in 632 provided all this and more. Like the Bible, the Qur'an is a book of divine revelation. Between them, these two books define the will of God for more than half the world's population. Over centuries, the Bible fashioned the Hebrew tribes into a nation: Israel. But in just a hundred years, the Qur'an created an entire civilization that at its height stretched from northern Africa and southern Europe in the West to the borders of modern India and China in the East. Even today, in streets as distant from each other as those of Tashkent, Khartoum, Qom and Kuala Lumpur, one can hear from dawn to dusk the constant murmur and chant of the Qur'an in melodious Arabic. Indeed, if there were a gospel according to Muhammad, it would begin with these words: in the beginning was the Book.

But since the events of September 11, the Qur'an and the religion it inspired have been on trial. Is Islam an inherently intolerant faith? Does the Qur'an oblige Muslims to wage jihad--holy war--on those who do not share their beliefs? And who are these "infidels" that the Muslim Scriptures find so odious? After all, Jews and Christians are monotheists, too, and most of their own prophets--Abraham, Moses and Jesus especially--are revered by Muslims through their holy book. Listening to the rants of Osama bin Laden and other radical Islamists, Jews and Christians wonder who really speaks for Islam in these perilous times. What common ground--if any--joins these three "Peoples of the Book," as Muslims call their fellow monotheists? What seeds of reconciliation lie within the Qur'an and the Bible and the traditions that they represent? Does the battle of the books, which has endured for centuries between

Muslims and believers in the West, ensure a perpetual clash of civilizations?

The Qur'an does contain sporadic calls to violence, sprinkled throughout the text. Islam implies "peace," as Muslims repeatedly insist. Yet the peace promised by Allah to individuals and societies is possible only to those who follow the "straight path" as outlined in the Qur'an. When Muslims run into opposition, especially of the armed variety, the Qur'an counsels bellicose response. "Fight them [nonbelievers] so that Allah may punish them at your hands, and put them to shame," one Qur'anic verse admonishes. Though few in number, these aggressive verses have fired Muslim zealots in every age.

The Bible, too, has its stories of violence in the name of the Lord. The God of the early Biblical books is fierce indeed in his support of the Israelite warriors, drowning enemies in the sea. But these stories do not have the force of divine commands. Nor are they considered God's own eternal words, as Muslims believe Qur'anic verses to be. Moreover, Israeli commandos do not cite the Hebrew prophet Joshua as they go into battle, but Muslim insurgents can readily invoke the example of their Prophet, Muhammad, who was a military commander himself. And while the Crusaders may have fought with the cross on their shields, they did not--could not--cite words from Jesus to justify their slaughters. Even so, compared with the few and much quoted verses that call for jihad against the infidels, the Qur'an places far more emphasis on acts of justice, mercy and compassion.

Indeed, the Qur'an is better appreciated as comprehensive guide for those who would know and do the will of God. Like the Bible, the Qur'an defines rules for prayer and religious rituals. It establishes norms governing marriage and divorce, relations between men and women and the way to raise righteous children. More important, both books trace a common lineage back to Abraham, who was neither Jew nor Christian, and beyond that to Adam himself. Theologically, both books profess faith in a single God (Allah means "The God") who creates and sustains the world. Both call humankind to repentance, obedience and purity of life. Both warn of God's punishment and final judgment of the world. Both imagine a hell and a paradise in the hereafter.

Divine Authority

As sacred texts, however, the Bible and the Qur'an could not be more different. To read the Qur'an is like entering a stream. At almost any point one may come upon a command of God, a burst of prayer, a theological pronouncement, the story of an earlier prophet or a description of the final judgment. Because Muhammad's revelations were heard, recited and memorized by his converts, the Qur'an is full of repetitions. None of its 114 suras, or chapters, focuses on a single theme. Each sura takes its title from a single word--The Cow, for example, names the longest--which appears only in that chapter. When Muhammad's recitations were finally written down (on palm leaves, shoulders of animals, shards of anything that would substitute for paper) and collected after his death, they were organized roughly from the longest to the shortest. Thus there is no chronological organization--this is God speaking, after all, and his words are timeless.

Nonetheless, scholars recognize that the shortest suras were received first, in Muhammad's Meccan period, and the longest in Medina, where he later became a political and military leader of the emerging community of Muslims. As a result, the longer texts take up matters of behavior and organization which are absent in the shorter, more "prophetic" suras that announce the need to submit. ("Muslim" means "submission" to God.) The Qur'an's fluid structure can be confusing, even to Muslims. "That's why one finds in Muslim bookstores such books as 'What the Qur'an says about women' or 'What the Qur'an says about a just society'," observes Jane McAuliffe of Georgetown University, editor of the new Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an.

Like the Bible, the Qur'an asserts its own divine authority. But whereas Jews and Christians regard the Biblical text as the words of divinely inspired human authors, Muslims regard the Qur'an, which means "The Recitation," as the eternal words of Allah himself. Thus, Muhammad is the conduit for God's words, not their composer. Moreover, since Muhammad heard God in Arabic, translations of the Qur'an are considered mere "interpretations" of the language of God's original revelation. "In this very important sense," says Roy Mottahedeh, professor of Middle Eastern history at Harvard, "the Qur'an is not the Bible of the Muslims." Rather, he says, it is like the oral Torah first revealed to Moses that was later written down. In gospel terminology, the Qur'an corresponds to Christ himself, as the logos, or eternal word of the Father. In short, if Christ is the word made flesh, the Qur'an is the word made book.

The implications of this doctrine are vast--and help to explain the deepest divisions between Muslims and other monotheisms. For Muslims, God is one, indivisible and absolutely transcendent. Because of this, no edition of the Qur'an carries illustrations--even of the Prophet--lest they encourage idolatry (shirk), the worst sin a Muslim can

commit. Muslims in the former Persian Empire, however, developed a rich tradition of extra-Qur'anic art depicting episodes in the life of Muhammad, from which the illustrations for this story are taken. But for every Muslim, the presence of Allah can be experienced here and now through the very sounds and syllables of the Arabic Qur'an. Thus, only the original Arabic is used in prayer--even though the vast majority of Muslims do not understand the language. It doesn't matter: the Qur'an was revealed through the Prophet's ears, not his eyes. To hear those same words recited, to take them into yourself through prayer, says Father Patrick Gaffney, an anthropologist specializing in Islam at the University of Notre Dame, "is to experience the presence of God with the same kind of intimacy as Catholics feel when they receive Christ as consecrated bread and wine at mass."

'People of the Book'

Why then, does the Qur'an acknowledge Jews and Christians as fellow "People of the Book," and as such, distinguish them from nonbelievers? Contrary to popular belief, "the Book" in question is not the Bible; it refers to a heavenly text, written by God, of which the Qur'an is the only perfect copy. According to the Qur'an, God mercifully revealed the contents of that book from time to time through the words of previous Biblical prophets and messengers--and also to other obscure figures not mentioned in the Bible. But in every case those who received his revelations--particularly the Jews and Christians--either consciously or inadvertently corrupted the original text, or seriously misinterpreted it. On this view, the Qur'an is not a new version of what is contained in the Bible, but what Jane McAuliffe calls a "re-revelation" that corrects the errors of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Readers of the Bible will find in the Qur'an familiar figures such as Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, Jesus and even the Virgin Mary, who appears much more often than she does in the New Testament, and is the only woman mentioned in the Qur'an by name. But their stories differ radically from those found in the Bible. In the Qur'an all the previous prophets are Muslims.

Abraham (Ibrahim), for example, is recognized as the first Muslim because he chose to surrender to Allah rather than accept the religion of his father, who is not mentioned in the Bible. Neither is the Qur'anic story of how Abraham built the Kaaba in Mecca, Islam's holiest shrine. Abraham's importance in the Qur'an is central: just as the Hebrews trace their lineage to Abraham through Isaac, his son by Sarah, the Qur'an traces Arab genealogy--and Muhammad's prophethood--back through Ishmael, a son Abraham had by Hagar.

The Qur'anic Moses (Musa) looks much like his Biblical counterpart. He confronts the pharaoh, works miracles and in the desert ascends the mountain to receive God's commandments. But in the Qur'an there is no mention of the Passover rituals, and among the commandments one of the most important for Jews--keeping the Sabbath--is absent. Obedience to parents is stressed repeatedly, but as in the Qur'anic story of Abraham, disobedience is required when parents are polytheists.

As a prophet rejected by his own people, the Qur'anic Jesus (Isa) looks a lot like Muhammad, who was at first rejected by the people of Mecca. He preaches the word of God, works miracles, is persecuted and--what is new, foretells his successor: Muhammad. But the Qur'an rejects the Christian claim that he is the son of God as blasphemous and dismisses the doctrine of the Trinity as polytheistic. The Crucifixion is mentioned in passing, but according to the Qur'an Jesus mysteriously does not die. Instead, Allah rescues him to heaven from where he will descend in the last days and, like other prophets, be a witness for his community of believers at the Final Judgment.

What Muhammad may have known about the Bible and its prophets and where he got his information is a purely scholarly debate. The Qur'an itself says that Muhammad met a Jewish clan in Medina. He even had his followers bow to Jerusalem when praying until the Jews rejected him as prophet. Some scholars claim that Muhammad had in-laws who were Christian, and they believe he learned his fasting and other ascetic practices from observing desert monks. But Muslims reject any scholarly efforts to link the contents of the Qur'an to the Prophet's human interactions. They cherish the tradition that Muhammad could not read or write as proof that the Qur'an is pure revelation. It is enough for them that Islam is the perfect religion and the Qur'an the perfect text.

That belief has not prevented Muslim tradition from transforming the Qur'an's many obscure passages into powerful myths. By far the most significant is the story developed from one short verse: "Glory be to Him who carried His servant at night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque, the precincts of which we have blessed, that we might show him some of our signs" (sura 17:1). From this Muslims have elaborated the story of Muhammad's mystical nighttime journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he addresses an assembly of all previous prophets from Adam to Jesus. Yet another version of this story tells of his subsequent Ascension (mi'raj) from Jerusalem to the throne of Allah, receiving honors along the way from the prophets whom he has superseded. For Sufi mystics, Muhammad's ascension is the paradigmatic story of the soul's flight to God. For many Muslim traditionalists, however, the journey

was a physical one. Either way, its geopolitical significance cannot be ignored because the spot where the ascension began is Islam's third holiest shrine: the Dome of the Rock on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

In Islam's current political conflicts with the West, the major problem is not the Muslims' sacred book but how it is interpreted. Muslims everywhere are plagued by a crippling crisis of authority. The Qur'an envisioned a single Muslim community (the umma), but as subsequent history shows, Muslims have never resolved the tension between religious authority and Islamic governments. When Islam was a great medieval civilization, jurists learned in the Qur'an decided how to apply God's words to changed historical circumstances. Their fatwas (opinions) settled disputes. But in today's Islamic states, authoritative religious voices do not command widespread respect. Like freewheeling fundamentalists of every religious stripe, any Muslim with an agenda now feels free to cite the Qur'an in his support. Osama bin Laden is only the most dangerous and obvious example.

Deciphering Meanings

But the Qur'an has its moderate interpreters as well. Since September 11, brave voices scattered across the Middle East have condemned the terrorist acts of killing civilians and judged suicide bombing contrary to the teaching of the Qur'an. Returning to the text itself, other scholars have found verses showing that Allah created diverse peoples and cultures for a purpose and therefore intended that the world remain pluralistic in religion as well. "The Qur'an," argues Muslim philosopher Jawad Said of the Al-Azhar Institute in Cairo, "gives support and encouragement to sustain the messengers of reform who face difficult obstacles."

America, too, has a core of immigrant and second-generation Muslim scholars who have experienced firsthand the benefits of democracy, free speech and the Bill of Rights. They think the Qur'an is open to interpretations that can embrace these ideals for Islamic states as well. Islam even has feminists like Azizah Y. al-Hibri of the University of Richmond Law School, who are laying the legal groundwork for women's rights through a careful reconsideration of the Qur'an and its classic commentators.

It is precisely here that the Bible and the Qur'an find their real kinship. As divine revelation, each book says much more than what a literal reading can possibly capture. To say that God is one, as both the Qur'an and the Bible insist, is also to say that God's wisdom is unfathomable. As the Prophet himself insisted, God reveals himself through signs whose meanings need to be deciphered. Here, it would seem, lie the promising seeds of religious reconciliation. Humility, not bravado, is the universal posture of anyone who dares to plumb the mind of God and seek to do his will.

Caption:

Pious Muslims, wherever they are--here, in a Cairo mosque--pray toward the holy city of Mecca.

THE ANNUNCIATION: In the Qur'an and the Bible the angel Gabriel is God's announcer. Through Gabriel, Muhammad hears the revelations that, for Muslims, is the Word of God made book. In the Bible, Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary she will give birth to Jesus who, for Christians, is the Word of God made flesh. , Muhammad with the angel Gabriel (left) from an undated Turkish manuscript; 'The **Annunciation**' by Fra Angelico, Italian, 1430-32

CREATION: Both the Qur'an and the Bible tell the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But for Muslims, as for Jews, their 'original sin' of disobedience is not passed on to humankind, so they don't require salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross--a central doctrine of Christianity., Adam and Eve (left) from a German Bible in 1491; painting of angels bowing before Adam and Eve in an Islamic book of prophecy, c. 1550

THE ASCENSION: In one story extrapolated from a verse in the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad ascends to the throne of God, the model for the Sufis' flight of the soul to God. In the Bible, Jesus ascends to the Father after he is resurrected from the dead. For Muhammad, it was inconceivable that Allah would allow one of his prophets to be executed as a criminal., Muhammad ascends (left) in a 1583 Turkish text; 'The Ascension,' by Jean Francois de Troy, French, 1721

HOLY PLACES: The Temple Mount (above) is the holiest shrine for Jews. At first Muhammad directed his followers also to face Jerusalem when they prayed. But after the Jews of Medina refused him as their prophet, he directed Muslims to bow in the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca, now the holiest shrine in Islam., Pilgrims at Mecca (left) from an Islamic religious treatise, c. 1410; 'The Wailing Wall,' oil on canvas by Charles Robertson, 1873

PEACE AND WAR: Muhammad was not only a prophet but a military commander who led Muslim armies into battle. Jesus, on the other hand, refused even to defend himself against the Roman soldiers who arrested him in the Garden of Gethsemane after he was betrayed with a kiss by Judas, one of his own disciples. The difference helps explain the contrasting attitudes toward war and violence in the Qur'an and the New Testament., Muhammad (above) victorious at `The Battle of Badr,' detail from a Turkish illumination, 1594-95; `The Betrayal of Christ,' fresco by Giotto di Bondone, Italian, c. 1305

ARTICLE 4: U.S. Muslim religious council issues fatwa against terrorism

The Fiqh Council of North America wishes to reaffirm Islam's absolute condemnation of terrorism and religious extremism.

Islam strictly condemns religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism. Targeting civilians' life and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is haram – or forbidden - and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not “martyrs.”

The Qur'an, Islam's revealed text, states: "Whoever kills a person [unjustly]...it is as though he has killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved all mankind." (Qur'an, 5:32)

Prophet Muhammad said there is no excuse for committing unjust acts: "Do not be people without minds of your own, saying that if others treat you well you will treat them well, and that if they do wrong you will do wrong to them. Instead, accustom yourselves to do good if people do good and not to do wrong (even) if they do evil." (Al-Tirmidhi)

God mandates moderation in faith and in all aspects of life when He states in the Qur'an: "We made you to be a community of the middle way, so that (with the example of your lives) you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind." (Qur'an, 2:143)

In another verse, God explains our duties as human beings when he says: "Let there arise from among you a band of people who invite to righteousness, and enjoin good and forbid evil." (Qur'an, 3:104)

Islam teaches us to act in a caring manner to all of God's creation. The Prophet Muhammad, who is described in the Qur'an as "a mercy to the worlds" said: "All creation is the family of God, and the person most beloved by God (is the one) who is kind and caring toward His family."

In the light of the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah we clearly and strongly state:

1. All acts of terrorism targeting civilians are haram (forbidden) in Islam.
2. It is haram for a Muslim to cooperate with any individual or group that is involved in any act of terrorism or violence.
3. It is the civic and religious duty of Muslims to cooperate with law enforcement authorities to protect the lives of all civilians.

We issue this fatwa following the guidance of our scripture, the Qur'an, and the teachings of our Prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him. We urge all people to resolve all conflicts in just and peaceful manners.

We pray for the defeat of extremism and terrorism. We pray for the safety and security of our country, the United States, and its people. We pray for the safety and security of all inhabitants of our planet. We pray that interfaith harmony and cooperation prevail both in the United States and all around the globe.

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ARTICLE 5: ISNA Mourns the Death of Pope John Paul II

Muslims Condole with Catholics

April 3, 2005

PLAINFIELD, IN – The Islamic Society of North America notes with profound grief the passing away of Pope John Paul II (1920-).

The polyglot Karol Joseph Wojtyla, speaking eight languages, entered office in 1978, at a momentous time when Eastern Europe was looking toward freedom. Even before becoming a faith leader, he took a compassionate view of people of other faiths. B'nai B'rith and other authorities have testified that he helped Jews find refuge from the Nazis.

the first Polish pope and also the first non-Italian pope since Pope Adrian VI in 1522, Pope Paul II through the entire pontificate insisted that there should be no animosity between Islam and the Catholic Church. Rather it is an approach toward one another for the purpose of mutual growth in understanding.

When John Paul II hosted the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, Muslims accepted the Pope's invitation to world religions to observe a day of fasting and prayer for peace. John Paul's outreach to Islam began with his address to 50,000 young Muslims in the stadium at Casablanca. King Hussein introduced the Pope to the crowd as "an educator and a defender of values that are shared by Islam and Christianity."

The Pope, who called Muslims "our younger brothers born in Abraham," insisted that Muslims "together with us adore the one, merciful God." He declared in 1999, "Muslims, like Jews and Christians, see the figure of Abraham as a model of unconditional submission to the decrees of God."

John Paul II also made visits to Syria (2001), Indonesia (1989) and Tunisia (1986). Even more important than these, however, are his interventions in the wars of Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, and Bosnia. John Paul was opposed to the 1991 Gulf war approved by the UN. His strong vocal opposition signaled to Islam that the Catholic Church does not identify itself with the interests, cultural ideologies and wars of any nation.

John Paul II has typically called the Muslims "brothers." Only a few months after his election and again in 1989, he issued appeals for peace in Lebanon.

ISNA prays that the successor to John Paul II will continue this tradition of interfaith kinship.

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