

“Jihad: Holy War & Faithfulness” (Sermon Series on Islam, Part IV)

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It's 1614, the last gasp of the medieval era. An edict goes out: priests are enlisted by the state to visit the homes of parishioners in order to look for and confiscate any signs of heretical worship, and lecture family members on the subject of doctrinal purity. Houses of worship are to be destroyed, and people found clinging to heresy are to be subjected to 'divine punishment.' Many believers go underground, and in 1637 some farmers rebel over unjust taxation as well as the issue of religious freedom. In 1638, after a prolonged struggle with government forces, more than 40,000 men, women and children are massacred in a castle in which they've taken refuge. In 1640 a Religious Inquisition Office is established to refine the process of examining apostates with such tortures as dismemberment, branding, water torture, and headfirst lowering into pits of excrement. 1

Isn't religion an ever-splendid thing?

Now, does anyone here think this is a story of Muslim fanaticism and intolerance? Probably not, because it sounds too much like the history of Christian Europe. But in fact, the people who were getting massacred and tortured were Christians, and the persecutors were Buddhist, Confucian and Shinto. I begin with this description (which was written by Kathleen Norris) to make the point that no religion has a monopoly on fanaticism and deadly intolerance.

So now let's move from the far-east to the middle-east to Judaism, the religion credited with bringing the world humanitarian values and human rights. It's the religion that is founded on the commandments which include: Thou shalt not murder. But in the same scripture that God commands the Jews not to murder, God also tells them they must annihilate the Canaanites in order to take over their land. This leaves the impression that there are two kinds of murder, and that one is ordained by God. The human rights that the Jews were to extend to others did not include the Canaanites. Thus, leaving a fairly clear message to anyone who accepts the Torah as the word of God that killing and exterminating a people can be part of God's plan.

Herein lies the roots of holy war in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions. In Deuteronomy 7:1-6 it reads:

When Yahweh your God has led you into the land you are entering to make your own, many nations will fall before you... Yahweh your God will deliver them over to you and you will conquer them... deal with them like this: tear down their alters, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles and set fire to their idols. For you are a people consecrated to Yahweh your God.

Now, as we know, Moses never made it to the promised land; it was Joshua who led the Israelites into Canaan in 1200 BCE, and he followed God's instructions to the letter. We read in the book of Joshua 8:24,25,28:

When Israel finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open ground and where they had followed them into the wilderness, and when all to a man had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and slaughtered all its people. The number of those that fell that day, men and women together was 12,000, all people of Ai... Then Joshua burned Ai, making it a ruin for evermore, a desolate place even to this day.

And in Chapter 11:21-22 we read:

Then Joshua came and wiped out the Anakim from the highlands, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, from all the highlands of Judah and all the inhabitants of Israel; no more Anakim were left in Israelite territory except at Gaza, Gath and Ashod.

For the next two centuries, the Israelites' holy wars continued under the leadership of people such as Gideon, Deborah and Samson.

So, to set the background for holy war, we now know that in the Jewish scriptures we not only have a God that smites this people and that, but we have a God that chooses one people to be moral exemplars to the world and this God instructs those moral exemplars to kill and exterminate other peoples.

Now, let's skip ahead a millennium to the origins of Christianity. Jesus brings the world the teaching that if someone strikes you on the cheek, you're not to fight back, but are to turn your other cheek so the person can strike it as well. He emphasized loving your neighbor as yourself and forgiving others. He explained: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." He's been called the Prince of Peace. And yet, more brutality and killing has been done in his name than probably any other religion.

Listen to the words of Pope Urban II who initiated the First Crusade in 1095 CE against Muslims.

...I exhort you with earnest prayer – not I, but God – that, as heralds of Christ, you urge men... of all ranks, knights as well as foot soldiers, rich as well as poor, to hasten to exterminate this vile race from the lands of your brethren. Christ commands it. And if those who set out to do so should lose their lives on the way by land, or in crossing the sea or in fighting the pagans, their sins shall be remitted. Oh what a disgrace if a race so despised, base and the instruments of demons, should so overcome a people endowed with faith in the all-powerful God, and resplendent with the name of Christ...

Here what we have is the most influential Christian leader of his time, a person who is thought to be God's representative on earth, imploring Christians to kill in the name of God and explaining that if they die in the cause, their sins will be forgiven. (Doesn't that sound familiar?)

The crusaders often slaughtered Jews in Europe as they set off on the crusades. Some who didn't go on crusades killed local Jews so they could at least feel like they were playing a part. They believed it was the Jews who killed Jesus, so they thought, why should we travel so far to fight the Muslims, when the killers of Jesus are right here among us? For the next four centuries, Christians could be found butchering and driving out Muslims, Pagans and Jews. They were guided by religious leaders and a belief that their actions were ordained by God.

We should keep in mind that during the years that the Muslims ruled Spain, Jews and Christians were protected and were able to hold political offices. Then after the Christians regained control of Spain in the fifteenth century, they slaughtered, converted and drove out the Muslims and the Jews.

The Jews understood themselves to be chosen by God as moral exemplars and priests to the world - a unique people having a special covenant with God. The Christians came later and accepted the story and scriptures of the Jews, but felt that the Jews had lost their calling by repeated transgressions of the covenant. So God sent his only son to die for humanity's sins and to offer a new covenant with all people who accept Jesus as lord and savior.

The Muslims came next in the seventh century CE, also believing also that God first came to the Jews and next that God sent Jesus as a prophet, and finally God sent one last prophet Mohammad. God then revealed to Mohammad the Koran, which is thought by Muslims to be God's final and flawless holy book. So, the followers of each subsequent religion have believed that their religion is the continuation and fulfillment of the previous ones.

After Mohammed's death in the seventh Century, the Muslim leaders who followed developed a theology of jihad that involved military expansion and Islamic conquest of the world. At first it was a way of keeping the

Muslim tribes from fighting one another. There's nothing like having a common enemy to bring a people together. As a matter of fact, that was one of Pope Urban's reasons for initiating the crusades. But the Koran is explicit about not engaging in aggression. The Koran allows for fighting in self defense and to ensure your right to worship Allah and when people are being oppressed by tyranny. But to instigate a war for the purpose of territorial expansion or to spread the faith is clearly unacceptable by the standards set out in the Koran.

Nevertheless, the jurists responsible for Holy Law (known as Sharia) developed a notion that the world is broken into two spheres: the House of Islam and the House of War. They taught that it was the duty of Muslims to spread the House of Islam throughout the world. With this notion of a holy war, Muslims would spread the Islamic empire from the Himalayas to Gibraltar in less than sixty years. It's from these early conquests that Islam developed the reputation of being a religion of the sword.

But by the eighth century it became clear that they would not be able to take over the entire world, and as they accepted this reality, they backed away from the theology of jihad and developed the notion, like Jews and Christians, that their ultimate victory would come at the time of the Last Judgment. At this point, Muslims began to enter into diplomatic relations with non-Muslims. It's to the credit of the Koran and Islamic traditions that the people living under Muslim rule enjoyed a high level of religious freedom and tolerance.

The Koran states that, "There shall be no compulsion in religion" (2:257). In that statement, the Koran probably contains the world's first declaration of religious toleration. It seems that when Muslims were in power, they were tolerant, it's only since losing much of their power and sovereignty, that Muslims have begun to redevelop the notion of a militaristic jihad.

The word jihad literally means "striving or struggle in the way of God." In Islam there's a notion that there is a greater and a lesser jihad. The greater is the internal battle we all face within ourselves to act righteously. The lesser jihad is the external battle for justice and equality in the world. In a well known passage from the sayings of Muhammad we are told: "A group of Muslims soldiers came to the Holy Prophet [after a battle]. He said: Welcome, you have come from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad. It was said, 'What is the greater jihad?' He said, 'The striving of a servant against his low desires.'" (Al-Tasharraf, Part I p. 70)

Nevertheless, the Koran is not a pacifistic scripture, and it clearly states that if it's necessary to fight to end oppression or tyranny, then it's a Muslim's duty to do so. There are however restrictions on such fighting. For example, war cannot be an act of aggression, only self defense. Civilians cannot be harmed; and prisoners of war must be dealt with fairly. The Koran even states that vegetation and animals are not to be destroyed in war. In all these ways we can see that what modern Islamic militants are engaging in does not meet the criteria of justifiable war as set out in the Koran.

Time and again all religions have been exploited by tyrants and debased by mobs. In the founding of the United States, the early settlers were devout Christians who believed and preached that the new world was the new Canaan and that they, the Puritans, were the new Israelites who were being sent by God to create "a city on a hill" to be a light unto the nations of the world. The early settlers saw themselves as God's new chosen people and their mission a holy mission. The native Americans were the new Canaanites who would need to be eliminated or displaced in order for the promised land to become the possession of God's rightful heirs. This rhetoric and these beliefs were instrumental in the development of the concept of Manifest Destiny. I share this because it's important for us to realize the ways in which this notion of holy war has directly impacted our own history even here in Oklahoma.

Even though there are very few Jews or Christians today who try to use scriptures to justify killing or war, the legacy of the Judeo-Christian notion of holy war has impacted our lives. And lest we think it's a relic of a bygone era, look no further than our own Senator Inhofe, who a few weeks ago told Congress that anyone

who can read the Bible knows that God gave Israel to the Jews and therefore we should allow Sharon to use any means necessary to protect it. This is not only bad foreign policy, it's bad theology. But besides Senator Inhofe and a few extremists who have killed abortion providers, there are few people today in the Jewish and Christian world using their scripture to justify killing as a holy endeavor.

There has been, however, in the Muslim world, a resurgence of the use of the notion of a militaristic jihad. And while it's a radical minority within Islam, they can't be overlooked. Much of the resurgence has come since the end of World War II and the formation of modern Israel. There was one prior attempt in 1914, when the Ottoman Turks declared a jihad against the allied forces in World War I. It was an attempt to rally pan-Islamic support, but it failed miserably. It reinforces the theory that Muslims, who had been historically very tolerant, have tried to re-instate the notion of a militaristic jihad since the time that Muslims have lost power and influence. Some modern examples include the argument written by Anwar Sadat's assassins. They claimed that jihad as armed action is a cornerstone at the heart of Islam and that it's the neglect of jihad that has led to the depressed position of Islam in the world. 2 The Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that Muslims must expose and overthrow oppressive rulers and he called for a holy war against the United States, but it had little political effect.

Saddam Hussein called for a jihad against the United States, which seemed more like an effort to Islam-ize his otherwise secular regime. And while his call did strike a cord with Muslims in parts of the world, it did not really effect the outcome of the Gulf war.

And now, Osama Bin Laden and his followers use the term jihad to explain their terrorist activities. In 1998 he said, "The call to wage war against America was made because America has spearheaded the crusades against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two holy mosques and...meddling in the affairs and politics of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control." He's referring here to American support of the monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Then, in his comments after the attack of September 11th, Bin Laden claimed: "What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years of humiliation and disgrace ...its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated."

Eighty years ago was when the British and French victors of World War I were redrawing the borders of the Middle-East. It was also about the time of Alfred Balfour, the British foreign minister's declaration in support of the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. The European powers divided up these territories, much like they did in Africa, to suit themselves without regard for the inhabitants.

Woodrow Wilson called World War I the war to end all wars. The dividing up of the Middle East, at the end of World War I, has been called "the peace to end all peace." Blood has been spilling in that part of the world ever since. And with September 11th it's started spilling over into this part of the world as well. The problem is that if we're not careful, we'll perpetuate our own holy war.

To see what I mean, think about the current crisis in Israel. I could stand before you this morning and make a passionate case for the Israeli side. Suicide bombers randomly blowing up scores of women and children and men as they go about their daily lives. But I could also make an argument for the Palestinians and all that they've suffered at the hands of the Israelis. But, what I don't think is possible is for Sharon or Arafat to be able to make the argument for the other side. And until they can see beyond their own prejudices and self interests, they will continue to kill each other's citizens. My concern is for the security of all the people living in Israel.

Holy war is about holding a belief so strongly that we can destroy a human life and believe it's necessary for our own salvation. It doesn't even have to be a religious belief. Stalin and Mao believed so strongly in the secular salvation inherent in their communist revolutions that they had no problem slaughtering and torturing millions of their own people to achieve it. Hitler and other Germans believed so powerfully in the ideal of

the super race, that they massacred millions of men, women and children to achieve what they thought was their destined and noble future.

Whatever we do to try to put an end to terrorism and to ensure security for ourselves and others, may we never forget to look from the perspective of the other side. When our national leaders use Manichaeian rhetoric that divides the world into two spheres, the sphere of good and the sphere of evil, the sphere of darkness and the sphere of light, the sphere of civilization and the sphere of barbarianism, we must be very careful not to be swept up in the same “holy war” mentality that has continuously plagued the human condition. We must remember the humanity (even of those whom we deem our enemies) or else we risk losing our own humanity. We need to be wary not to be fooled into believing that we somehow possess some unique virtue and that our actions and goals are inherently good.

Don't misunderstand me, there's no question that terrorism presents a real threat and is worthy of our moral outrage and our wholehearted resistance. But if we continue to see our enemy not just as an enemy, but as evil itself, we are setting ourselves up for an endless war. Just like in Israel, if we cannot truly understand the humanity and the concerns of the other side, and see how our history and our choices have contributed to the current situation, then our righteousness can easily lapse into self-righteousness and as we've seen, it can be hard for crusaders to know the difference.

Take courage, friends. The way is often hard. The path is never clear and the stakes are very high. Take courage, for deep down there is a better way. The way of truth and understanding and love. And the greatest of these is love. God bless you. Amen.

1 Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* p. 220

2 Jansen, Johannes J. G. *The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and the Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East*. New York, Macmillan 1986 pp. 22, 102.