

HOLY TERRORS

Thinking about Religion after September 11

BRUCE LINCOLN

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For my mother
Gerry Grossman

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Parts of this book were written in the months after September 11, 2001, as I struggled to react in an intellectually responsible fashion to the immediate events and the broader, more complex issues that day raised. As a historian of religions, the most pressing item to ponder was the extent to which the attacks of September 11 could rightly be considered religious. My initial attempt involved a close reading of four key texts: the instructions that Mohamed Atta and others studied in the last days of their lives (chapter 1), speeches given by George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden as military action commenced in Afghanistan on October 7 (chapter 2), and the interpretations of September 11 offered by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson immediately thereafter (chapter 3). Exploring the religious aspects of their rhetoric and consciousness, however, meant confronting a much more general and considerably less tractable question: What do we mean by “religion”?

Over the years I have usually ducked that question, while gradually edging closer to it. Since the late 1970s I have focused much of my attention on a related issue that is only slightly less vast, that is, the changing roles religion has played (or can play) in politics and culture, above all in moments of violent struggle. I came to this set of interests at the time of the Iranian Revolution (1977–79), when I realized that theory then current among students of religion had very little to say about the world-historic events unfolding before our eyes: least of all, about the unexpectedly potent mix of the religious and the insurgent.

This book represents my attempt to think through the nature of religion, to identify its core components (discourse, practice, community, institution), and to specify its historically changing relation to other aspects of culture (particularly the ethical, aesthetic, and political). In the first three chapters, I consider several key texts immediately connected to the events of September 11. These are extreme, and not typical data, for the study of religion, but precisely for that reason I find them challenging, important, and analytically revealing. In chapters 4 through 6, I turn to other data and am particularly concerned with three moments, projects, and contexts. First,

there is that which commenced with the Reformation and culminated in the Enlightenment, when Europeans, reacting to the horrors of the Religious Wars, reorganized their culture such that religion was consigned to a much-diminished role in culture. Second, the period of nineteenth- to twentieth-century colonial and neocolonial domination, when European and North American powers exported and sought to impose this minimalist model of religion on the rest of the world. Third, the reaction that gained force in the period after the end of the cold war, as activists throughout the globe sought to reassert religion's dominating position in culture against the preferences of postcolonial elites and the secular states they inhabit.

The chapters appear roughly in reverse order from that in which they were written. Thus, chapter 6, which treats revolutionary movements with a strong religious character, was written in the early 1980s, in the wake of the Iranian upheaval. Chapters 4 and 5, which treat the place of religion in culture and the question of why religious conflict has come to be so common in the postcolonial context, were written in the late 1990s, as patterns of violent struggle changed dramatically after the cold war era. Both of these pieces were substantially revised and updated after September 11. Chapters 1 and 2, which work out a general definition and theory of religion, while dealing with key documents relevant to the attacks of the 11th, were written in October and November of that same year. Chapter 3, which pursues some notorious reactions to the 11th, took shape in January and February 2002.

Various of these pieces were presented in oral form on one occasion or another, and I benefited greatly from the critical responses I received from colleagues at the Universities of Copenhagen, Colorado, and California at Santa Cruz (chapter 1); the University of Chicago and Yale University (chapter 2); the American Academy of Religion, Rocky Mountain Regional meetings (chapter 3); Bates, Dartmouth, and Reed Colleges and the University of California at Santa Barbara (chapter 4); Mount St. Mary's College and Århus University (chapter 5); and the University of Minnesota (chapter 6). In particular, I should like to thank Louise Lincoln, Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Martin Riesebrodt for reading and commenting on various pieces and, more broadly, for their ongoing collegial conversation and stimulation. I am also most grateful for the splendid assistance of Mari Rethelyi and Nathelda McGee and the ongoing support of Clark Gilpin and Rick Rosengarten. For various invitations, comments, feedback, provocation, and input, I am indebted to Stefan Arvidsson, Ron Breiger, William J. Buckley, John Calvert, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ira Chernus, John and Adela Collins, Erik Davis, Robin Derby, Karen DeVries, Wendy Doniger, Prasenjit Duara, Rox-

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The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment

I

Before we can begin to think about the ways religion, culture, and politics interact, either in general or with direct reference to the September 11 attacks, it is useful to have some clarity about what we take “religion” to be. Attempts to define religion, however, are presently in serious disarray. In the not-too-distant past, Clifford Geertz’s view of religion as a “cultural system” was more or less hegemonic. The classic paragraph, on which a generation of students was trained, posits that

a religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹

Within the last decade this formulation has fallen badly out of favor, largely as the result of Talal Asad’s critique, which involves two telling points. The first proceeds from his observation that Geertz made interiority the locus of the religious (as indicated by his nouns: symbols, moods, motivations, conceptions). This works well for certain styles of religiosity: above all (and not coincidentally), Protestantism, which thus becomes the implicit model of religion per se. There are, however, things one intuitively wants to call “religion”—Catholicism and Islam, for instance—that are oriented less toward “belief” and the status of the individual believer, and more to embodied practice, discipline, and community.² Under Geertz’s definition, such concerns and traditions tend to be ignored, distorted, rendered aberrant, or relegated to the margins of the religious.

The conclusion that Geertz unwittingly normalized features of his own (necessarily parochial) cultural/religious background is the starting point for Asad’s second, more radical critique. Geertz’s error, he argues, was not simply the product of some individual failing, but a specific manifestation of problems inherent to the project. For insofar as the task of defining anything

presumes a discrete object that can be identified in contradistinction to others, this implies a model of "religion" that emerged only with the Enlightenment. Prior to that time, even in western Europe religion cannot be analytically (or practically) disarticulated from virtually all other aspects of culture.

As Peter Gay and others in his wake remind us, the Enlightenment can be read as a long struggle against the regime of truth that was centered in and championed by the medieval church. Weakened by the Reformation and Wars of Religion, the church and the faith it represented retained their connection to—and considerable control over—all aspects of social, political, intellectual, and economic life. The goal of those who waged this struggle (from Bayle to Kant, by way of Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire) was to constrain and deprive this hegemon, opening space for secular arts and sciences, not to speak of political economy.³ Kant brought this struggle to an end with a compromise formulation, whereby "religion" was acknowledged as the only means to engage lofty metaphysical issues like the immortality of the soul, but inappropriate for all other matters. For everything save metaphysics, reason is both necessary and sufficient, and it is with this division of intellectual labor that Western modernity was founded.⁴

The view of religion as delimited, and therefore definable, is thus itself culturally bound, historically recent, and discursively loaded. "There cannot be a universal definition of religion," Asad concludes, "not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."⁵ And since he wrote his *Genealogies of Religion*, most have heeded his counsel.⁶

While the second part of Asad's sentence is wonderfully insightful, it is not clear to me why it entails the absolute prohibition of the first phrase. Is not all language "the historical product of discursive processes"? Granted, this makes language imperfect, elusive, and considerably more complex than common sense would have it. It hardly renders futile all efforts at definition, however, particularly when one understands these as provisional attempts to clarify one's thought, not to capture the innate essence of things. Returning to the specific question, one can begin to improve on past efforts by acknowledging, with Asad, that an atypical example—that is, the severely restricted religion advocated by Kant toward the end of the Enlightenment—got definitional efforts off the ground. Given this, the end result of our definitional labors ought to problematize, and not normalize, the model that prompted their inception. To this end, we need to stress two points. First,

that which makes this delimited type of religion heuristically useful also makes it an extreme case: hardly the paradigm against which to measure all other examples. Second, when we take this as a starting point for discussion, we invert a line of historic development. Clearly delineated religions do not have this characteristic by "nature" but acquire it as the result of fierce historical struggles, in the course of which they suffer amputations and are forced to withdraw from their involvement in many other areas of culture (see further, chapter 4).

II

Differences in the extent to which the religious is imbricated with, or—to put it more strongly—penetrates and controls other aspects of culture, often become evident in moments of cultural contact. Consider, for example, a text written by Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), an influential Islamist author and theoretician. Although he initially worked with the Free Officers who brought Gamal Abdul Nasser to power, Qutb later became disenchanted with Nasser's mix of nationalism and socialism, which he found secular and soul-less. Accordingly, he shifted his allegiance to the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), for which he was imprisoned from 1954 to 1964. Freed briefly, he took the opportunity to publish his most militant work, *Milestones* (*Ma'alim fi al-tariq*, also translated as *Signposts Along the Way* [1964]), which led to his rearrest and execution by hanging (August 29, 1966), notwithstanding protests throughout the Muslim world.

Prior to his imprisonment, Qutb was employed as an inspector of public schools by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. In the wake of the Second World War, he became increasingly critical of Westernizing trends, against which Egyptians needed to protect their "spiritual capital and intellectual heritage."⁷ Between November 1948 and August 1950, a grant from the Ministry of Education let him study and travel in the United States, where his views deepened and became more critical.⁸ Distressed by many aspects of American culture—from the violence of football to homeowners' obsession with lawn care (in which he perceived a retreat from social interchange and civic spirit)—Qutb was most concerned with the state he came to call jahiliyyah in his later writings. Traditionally, this term designates the age of spiritual ignorance characterizing the pre-Islamic period of barbarism, and he extended its usage to describe the modern world's malaise, where jahiliyyah was not just a matter of ignorance, but a more active state of rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth.⁹

Shortly after returning to Egypt, Qutb wrote about a church dance he observed in Greeley, Colorado, where he studied for a time at the Colorado State College of Education.¹⁰

Every young man took the hand of a young woman. And these were the young men and women who had just been singing their hymns! Red and blue lights, with only a few white lamps, illuminated the dance floor. The room became a confusion of feet and legs; arms twisted around hips; lips met lips; chests pressed together.¹¹

Qutb was not disturbed simply by the eroticism he took to be indecorous and improper.¹² More troubling, but analytically most revealing, was the enabling condition of this offensive spectacle: the disconnection between the preceding "religious" church service and the "social" event that followed, as is signaled by his gasp of horror: "These were the young men and women who had just been singing their hymns!" In a proper society, as Qutb saw it, people understood that God's law spoke decisively about relations between the sexes. In America such things seemed left to the whims of fashion and secular moral standards ("good taste"). Religion—such as it was—had been confined to a limited time, place, and role (Sunday mornings, bedtime prayers, Easter and Christmas), with little capacity to shape and stabilize other aspects of human activity or invest them with transcendent meaning. As he put it in the same essay, "No one builds as many churches as the Americans do. . . . Notwithstanding all this, there is no one as removed from feeling the spirituality, respect, and sacredness of religion than the Americans."¹³

One could unpack this incident at much greater length, but for the moment let me simply note that it is wrong to constitute Qutb as a representative of "Islam," which is no more a monolithic entity than is "American religion." One can find many Americans who sympathize with his view that religion ought to be the dominating force in society (cf. chapter 3), just as one can find many Muslims who feel religion need not control all aspects of life but can leave a certain space for relaxation and recreation. Qutb's activism, in fact, was prompted by his perception that *jahiliyyah* was sweeping through Egypt and was especially favored by elites of the secularizing postcolonial state (for a discussion of like situations elsewhere, see chapter 5).

The difference between Qutb and his Greeley hosts reveals two models of the religious that can probably be found in all religions, particularly those that encompass large numbers of people in diverse historic eras, geographic

regions, and social strata. One style—that of Qutb—I would characterize as ① maximalist, rather than "fundamentalist," a term that has inflammatory connotations and fails to capture what is really crucial: that is, the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social, indeed of human existence.¹⁴ The other, by contrast, is ② minimalist. This is the position taken by Kant at the culmination of the Enlightenment, which restricts religion to an important set of (chiefly metaphysical) concerns, protects its privileges against state intrusion, but restricts its activity and influence to this specialized sphere. Definition can begin with the more recently emergent minimalist type of religion but needs to be capacious and flexible enough to cover maximalist types and the long spectrum of intermediate positions. That said, we still need to consider what the constitutive elements of an adequate definition might be.

III

Before taking the leap, let us recall Asad's narrower objection to Geertz. Any definition that privileges one aspect, dimension, or component of the religious necessarily fails, for in so doing it normalizes some specific traditions (or tendencies therein), while simultaneously dismissing or stigmatizing others. Asad calls specific attention to the need to include both practice and discourse.¹⁵ As he made clear, one also has to get beyond models that privilege interiority and understand that religious subjects are also bound in moral communities that enjoy their allegiance and serve as a base of their identity (thus, Durkheim). Further, communities are governed—sometimes more and sometimes less strictly—by institutional structures that direct the group and command their members' obedience (thus, Weber).

A proper definition must therefore be polythetic and flexible, allowing for wide variations and attending, at a minimum, to these four domains:

4 DOMAINS OF REL. DEF.

- ①. A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status. Discourse becomes religious not simply by virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority and truth. Astrophysicists, for instance, do not engage in religious speech when they discuss cosmogony, so long as they frame their statements as hypotheses and provisional conclusions based on experimentation, calculation, and human reason. The same is true when morticians describe what happens after death. But should they ground their views in Scripture, revelation, or immutable ancestral traditions, in that moment their discourse becomes religious because of its claim to transcendent

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TRANSCENDENT

authority.¹⁶ Insofar as certain propositions or narratives successfully claim such status, they position themselves as truths to be interpreted, but never ignored or rejected. Contestation then takes place within the realm of hermeneutics. Religious discourse can recode virtually any content as sacred, ranging from the high-minded and progressive to the murderous, oppressive, and banal, for it is not any specific orientation that distinguishes religion, but rather its metadiscursive capacity to frame the way any content will be received and regarded.

2. A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected. Religious practices, which generally divide into the ritual and the ethical, render religious discourse operational, moving it from the realm of speech and consciousness to that of embodied material action. As such, they have a transitive character, being the way discourse acts on the world, including the people through whom this action occurs. At the same time, they are reflexive in nature, being the way human subjects act on themselves in sustained projects of religiously motivated and informed programs of self-perfection. No practices are inherently religious, and any may acquire a religious character when connected to a religious discourse that constitutes them as such. Thus, for instance, for a man to grow a beard becomes a religious action when he does so in emulation of Jesus or the prophet Muhammad, constituted as the ultimate examples of human perfection. Lacking an argument and motive of this sort, his beard reflects a strictly aesthetic preference.

3. A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices. Those who revere the same texts (whether written or oral), adhere to the same precepts (taken from those texts and their commentaries), and engage in the same sorts of practices (grounded in texts and precepts) have a great deal in common. Even when they disagree with one another, their disagreements are framed by reference points on which they can concur: How is this Scripture to be interpreted? When (and how) should that ritual be performed? What is the best response to a given behavior that shared values define as a moral failing? All of this creates the basis for strong sentiments of affinity that are also fostered by specific aspects of discourse and practice, like regular assemblies for worship, prohibitions on intermarriage with outsiders, or threats of excommunication for various infractions. Individual and col-

lective identities come to be embedded in groups that are bound together in this fashion. Borders, simultaneously social and religious, hold members of one group separate from those whose beliefs and practices differ sufficiently that they can be marked as other. Even seemingly trivial differences—those of diet and dress, for example—can assume enormous import in the construction of alterity. But the fact is, these are hardly trivial, for practices understood to be governed by sacred injunctions constitute the observant as faithful and righteous, radically different from nonobservant outsiders, who are constituted as neither.

4. An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value. Coherence over space and continuity over time are secured by formal or semiformal structures staffed by officials, experts, and functionaries authorized to speak and act not only on behalf of the community, but also on behalf of the tradition or religion itself. Such structures vary tremendously in their size, power, rigidity, elite status, funding, degree of centralization, degree of hierarchy, and style of operation. But in whatever form they take, they house the leaders who assume responsibility for preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of the group's defining discourse; supervision of its rituals; adjudication and enforcement of its ethics; nurturance, defense, and advancement of the community. Sometimes they derive considerable wealth from such service, and they are regularly caught up in serious contradictions. The most important of these is the contradiction between their own corporate self-interests and those of the community, and that between the need to accommodate change while preserving claims to eternal truth.

All four domains—discourse, practice, community, and institution—are necessary parts of anything that can properly be called a “religion.” Each can be developed and emphasized to differing degrees and can relate to the others in various ways. Discourse and practice may be closely coordinated, for instance, or badly out of sync (for all that members of the community or officials of the institution desperately claim otherwise). Similarly, institution and community may cooperate closely, with the latter subordinate to and directed by the former, or may be locked in power struggles and hold each other in contempt. Institution may value discourse above practice and community, just the reverse; or they may agree on the value of practice, while

differing on the specific practices they valorize. Further, every macro-entity that gets called a “religion”—Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity, for example—has countless internal varieties and subdivisions, each of which undergoes its own historic process of development and change.

Sweeping characterizations of these macro-entities are always misleading, especially the simplistic caricatures that contrast one to another (“Protestantism is strong on discourse; Catholicism, on practice,” to take a cheap example). At best, one can try to assess specific movements or tendencies within a tradition at given moments of their development, recognizing that each macro-religion encompasses many such groups and tendencies. No one of these is normative; rather, they compete with one another—sometimes sharply—with the capacity to represent themselves as most faithful, authentic, or orthodox being both an arm and a stake of their struggle (see further, chapter 6).

IV

With this by way of background, I want to consider a document of extraordinary historic importance: the set of instructions Mohamed Atta left in his luggage on the morning of September 11, 2001, along with his last will and testament, apparently intending that these papers be found after his death (appendix A).¹⁷ Two other copies of these same instructions were found in the effects of hijackers on other planes, which suggests that, at a minimum, these were provided to the leaders of each team, who used them to prepare for—and understand—their deeds of September 11.¹⁸ Although these documents bear no signature, authorship is best attributed to the apparatus responsible for the attacks, presumably the al Qaeda network. Close reading permits one to see how religious discourse construed mass murder and terrible destruction as religious practices and also affords insight into the way al Qaeda constitutes itself as a religious institution that acts on behalf of a broader religious community (the Islamic *ummah*).

The text begins with formal invocations, one quite orthodox (“In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate,” §1) and one almost shockingly unconventional (“In the name of God, of myself and of my family,” §1). After this it segues into prayer, prompting the reader to ask for forgiveness for all his sins (something that would be granted a martyr [*shahid*]) and to view the coming events as deeds done to glorify God (§1). Having thus gestured toward the immediate future, the text recalls a moment from the paradigmatic past, which it frames as the model for what is to come: “Re-

member the battle of the prophet . . . against the infidels, as he went on building the Islamic state” (§2).

The balance of the text is organized in three sections and describes how to prepare for the coming operation. A few paragraphs treat technical matters (§§3, 4, 15), but the overwhelming majority address spiritual concerns. Even those items explicitly identified as “worldly things” (§16) are invested with religious significance, as when the men are told to wear tight-fitting clothes “since this is the way of the pious generations after the Prophet [who] would tighten their clothes before battle” (§16).

Along these lines, the first paragraph of the text’s first section (“The Last Night”) includes suggestions that have struck uninformed readers as banal, profane, or pedestrian: “Shave excess hair from the body and wear cologne. Shower” (§3). In the last paragraph of the same section, however, cleansing one’s body is described as ablution: a ritual act of self-purification that helps secure salvation.

Pray the morning prayer in a group and ponder the great rewards of that prayer. Make supplications afterwards, and *do not leave your apartment unless you have performed ablution* before leaving, because *the angels will ask for your forgiveness as long as you are in a state of ablution*, and will pray for you. (§17; my emphasis)

In general, the hijackers’ last night on earth is treated as a time for spiritual preparation, during which they should pray for success, victory over their enemies, also for God’s mercy and assistance, making use of specific prayers at appropriate times and places (§§7, 8, 10, 13, 17). In addition, they should read and reflect on the Quran, especially two suras that treat battles against nonbelievers: suras 8 and 9, which are explicitly commended in §5 and repeatedly cited thereafter (§§6, 21, 22, 28, 30, 33). Mere reading, however, was not enough. Verses of the Quran were to be spoken into cupped hands, then rubbed into one’s body and equipment so their power could be quite literally incorporated (§14). The men were to review their plans (§4), check their equipment (§15), anticipate problems that might arise (§11), and calm themselves with the knowledge that paradise was near (§§6, 9, 10, 11; cf. §§23, 24, 25, 30, 36). Most sweepingly, the text advises: “Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called ‘this world.’ The time for play is over and the serious time is upon us” (§9).

The section titled “The Second Step” treats the interstitial period between

leaving home on the morning of September 11 until entry into the plane. Driving to the airport, the men should "remember God constantly" (§18) and thereafter offer a series of prophylactic prayers every time they enter new space or terrain (§§18, 19, 23, 26). Implicitly acknowledging the anxieties they will experience, the text counsels its readers to master fear, which it defines as a great form of worship appropriate only for God (§§21, 22). Time and again it promises victory and paradise, effortlessly mixing Quranic allusions with reassurance of God's support.

"The Third Phase" treats events inside the plane, beginning with the prayer one offers at the threshold. Once seated, the men were to run through all their prayers once more, keeping "busy with the constant remembrance of God" (§27; cf. §§28–29). Finally, the text discusses the violence needed to seize the plane and the ethical problems posed by these bloody acts. It admonishes that killing is to be done without anger (§32) and ought not cause pain (§31), while insisting that no prisoners be taken (§33) and no compassion ought to compromise the mission (§31). Two arguments are provided (not simply to justify, but to sanctify the shedding of blood). The more frequent, predictable, and important of these is citation of Muhammad's military practices as a legitimating and inspirational model (§§29, 32, 33, 37). More original—and more shocking—is the constitution of the hijackers' first victims (i.e., the flight attendants) as sacrificial beasts, whose throats would be slit in ritual fashion (§31; cf. §15).

Imagining the moment when its readers have taken control of the planes, the text envisions a short time for congratulations, when one could cite appropriate verses from the Quran, sing an inspirational song, and sip water as minimal reward for a job well done (§§34, 35). After which, comes the finale.

When the hour of reality approaches . . . wholeheartedly welcome death for the sake of God. Always be remembering God. Either end your life while praying, seconds before the target, or make your last words: "There is no God but God, Muhammad is His messenger." (§35)

v

If we consider this text and its relation to the events of September 11 with reference to the four categories discussed earlier, it is convenient to begin with practice. The instructions rarely treat the mission as a whole and never mention its fiery finish. Instead, the operation is atomized, decomposed into a series of minute actions, each of which is invested with religious significance in one fashion or another. Thus, bathing is treated as ablution and connected

to purifying one's soul (§§3, 9, 17). Dressing is represented as girding for battle, with care to preserve modesty, and follows the model established by the first Muslims (§16). Tying one's shoes has the same significance attached to it (§16), while all items of one's equipment—luggage, clothes, knife, papers, and personal effects—are to have prayers physically embedded in them (§14). Riding in a taxi becomes an occasion to remember God, with separate supplications for entry and leaving (§18–19). Stepping into the plane is experienced as part of "a battle for the sake of God" (§27), and the instant the plane begins to move, one should pray "because you are traveling to Almighty God, so be attentive on this trip" (§27). In similarly (maximalist) fashion, sharpening one's knife is preparation for a ritual of sacrifice (§15); gritting one's teeth, a repetition of gestures used by the first Muslims (§29), as is singing songs to boost morale (§34). Throughout their mission, the men are counseled, "Be busy with the constant remembrance of God" (§27). Further, "You must remember to make supplications wherever you go, and any time you do anything, and God is with his faithful servants" (§26).

The text effectively instructs its readers how to overcome whatever hesitations might interfere with their mission. Acknowledging the possibility of fear, doubt, and moral qualms (§§6, 9, 11, 21, 22, 24, 31, 37), it offers a program of exhortation and reassurance to those on the brink of terrifying acts. Indeed, its goal is to close whatever gap might remain between the ideals al Qaeda advocates and their full realization in these men. "Do not seem confused or show signs of nervous tension," it counsels. "Be happy, optimistic, calm, because you are heading for a deed that God loves and will accept" (§24; cf. §§6, 14, 29). This last phrase concisely summarizes the text's persuasive project: definition of the entire undertaking—theft of the planes, murder of their crews, and the final paroxysm of death and destruction—as something religiously sanctioned: "a deed that God loves and will accept."

That task is accomplished by (welding practice to discourse), providing each grubby, banal, or lethal act with authoritative speech that ennobles and redefines it not just as a moral necessity but also a sacred duty. Three different bodies of discourse are used in this fashion. The first is that of the text itself, which mobilizes and encapsulates the others. Its authorial persona having been effaced, it manifests impersonal certainty and fervor, speaking a language drenched in piety, through which it purports to make the divine will patently apparent. God himself is mentioned a full eighty-nine times and appears in more than three-quarters of the document's paragraphs (30 out of 38). Mentions of the Prophet and the first generation of Muslims are also frequent (25 times in 15 paragraphs), and hardly a paragraph goes by

without discussion of such topics as purification (5 times), martyrdom (5 times), the need to struggle against infidels (11 times), or the promise of heavenly reward (6 times).

Second, there is prayer, the discourse—also the practice—that connects the human to the divine through the medium of language. In nine different paragraphs, the text enjoins prayers or supplications appropriate to the following occasions: evening (§§7, 13), morning (§13, 17), when entering a car (§18), when entering a town (§§13, 18), when entering a new place of any sort (§§18, 19), when in motion (§26, 27), before meeting the enemy (§13), for victory (§§7, 28), and at the moment of death (§35). Once again a maximalist intention is evident in the desire for religious devotion to fill all time, space, and action, maintaining unbroken one's connection to God and calling forth his reciprocity.

You must remember to make supplications wherever you go, and anytime you do anything, and God is with his faithful servants, He will protect them and make their tasks easier, and give them success and control, and victory, and everything. . . . (§26)

Finally, there is the most privileged discourse of all: that of the Quran, which the instructions implicitly claim to mediate, while parasitically appropriating as much of its authority as possible. No fewer than twenty-two Quranic quotations appear in this text and many more allusions. No doubt is permitted concerning the divine status of Scripture, since citations are invariably introduced as God's word (§§6, 11, 12, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 30, 33, 34, 37).¹⁹ Most emphatic is the following formulation:

Remember God frequently, and the best way to do it is to read the Holy Qur'an, according to all scholars, as far as I know. It is enough for us that it is the words of the Creator of the Earth and the plants, the One that you will meet [on Judgment Day]. (§8)

✓ Shrewd use of Quranic citations also permits the instructions to blur the present moment with paradigmatic events of the past. Regularly, the passages the text chooses to quote describe the first generation who heeded the Prophet's call and took up arms to defend the new faith (§§12, 21, 28, 30, 33, 34, 37). These fervently committed Muslims overcame enemies far more numerous than they (§§12, 37), and their victory is attributed to God's support, with the result that power is redefined as a function of piety rather than wealth, arms, or numbers.

This point is made in several passages to which the instruction text gives double emphasis. These are found in the two chapters of the Quran that the text commends as proper reading for the "last night" (§5). Having insured that the men would have read these passages and would understand their original context, the text then quotes key phrases from them in ways that connect their contents to the bold actions planned for September 11. Thus, in discussing the hijackers' approach to the airport, the text takes up the question of American technical superiority. "All of their equipment and gates and technology will not prevent, nor harm, except by God's will," it explains. "The believers do not fear such things. The only ones that fear it are the allies of Satan, who are the brothers of the devil" (§21). Then it goes on to quote a Quranic phrase, by way of reassurance: "so fear them not, and fear Me, if you are believers" (§21). This comes from a passage that says nothing about technology but thematizes the conflict as one of believers against unbelievers.

Fight the leaders of unbelief. . .

Are you afraid of them?

You would do better to be afraid of God, if you are believers.

Fight them, and God will chastise them at your hands

And degrade them, and He will help you

Against them, and bring healing to the breasts of a people who believe.²⁰

VI

In like fashion, the text redeploys familiar and evocative Quranic terminology to construct al Qaeda's chosen adversary not in terms of national, racial, or political alterity, but as people to whom one is opposed on strictly religious grounds. They are infidels (§§2, 28), nonbelievers (§§22, 30, 32), and allies of Satan (§21), while the text construes its readers and authors as believers (§§19, 21), the faithful (§§12, 27), allies of God (§22), and God's faithful servants (§§26, 37). Over the course of its discussion, the hijackers gradually merge with the pious heroes who made possible Islam's initial triumphs and become their reinstantiation (§§2, 16, 29, 32). Conversely, the United States becomes the contemporary incarnation of *jahiliyyah*: the barbarism and spiritual ignorance that preceded Islam and offered savage—but misguided and unsuccessful—resistance to the Prophet, his armed followers, and his message (fig. 1.1).

Al Qaeda thus implicitly represents itself as the most faithful heir to the Prophet and his original followers, also the implacable enemy of savage non-believers. Seemingly strong, the latter are actually weak and will be defeated,

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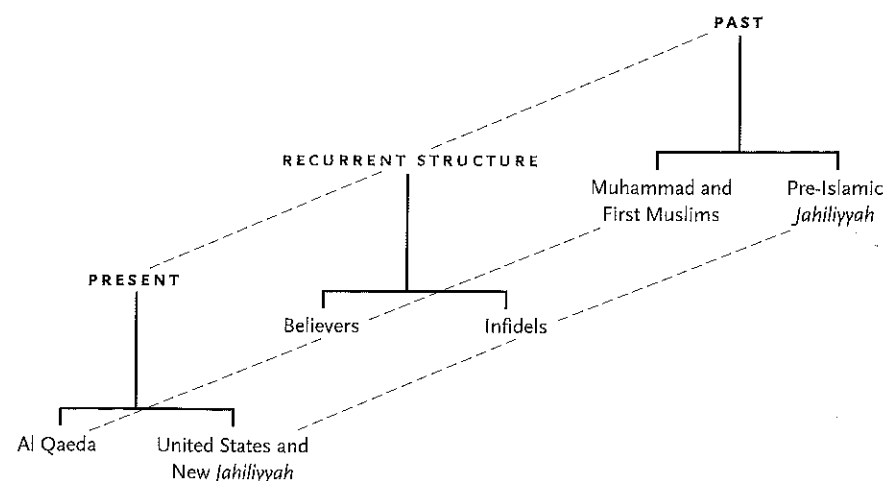


FIGURE 1.1 Alignment of contemporary struggles with those of the early Muslim era.

as were their *jahili* ancestors. Such a view picks up on the analysis advanced by Sayyid Qutb in his last, most radical writings, where he argued that a new and more virulent *jahiliyyah* introduced by the West had made powerful inroads within Islam. To counter that trend, restore proper religion, and rescue the world from its own most profane impulses, he argued that a small group of the faithful would have to withdraw from the corrupt world in a repetition of Muhammad's Hegira. From safe redoubts, they could prepare to meet and overthrow the *jahili* order, with confidence in God's support. Compounding his earlier maximalist views with a new militance, he thus produced blueprints usable for a group like al Qaeda.

Jahiliyyah always takes the form of a living movement in a society and has its own leadership, its own concepts and values, and its own traditions, habits, and feelings. It is an organized society and there is a close cooperation and loyalty among its individuals, and it is always ready and alive to defend its existence consciously or unconsciously. It crushes all elements that seem to be dangerous to its personality.

When *jahiliyyah* takes the form not of a "theory" but of an active movement in this fashion, then any attempt to abolish it and to bring people back to Allah would be useless if it presented Islam merely as a theory. Since *jahiliyyah* controls the practical world and has a living and active organization for its support, mere theoretical efforts to fight it cannot even be equal to it, much less

superior. When the purpose is to abolish the existing system and to replace it with a new system which in its characteristic principles and all its general and particular aspects is different from the controlling *jahili* system, then it stands to reason that this new system should also come into the battlefield as an organized movement and a viable group. It should come into the battlefield with a determination that its strategy, its social organization, and the relationship between its individuals should be firmer and more powerful than the existing *jahili* system. . . .

Islam's theoretical foundation—the belief—therefore must be actualized in the form of an organized and active group from the very beginning. This group must separate itself from the *jahili* society and become independent and distinct from the active and organized *jahili* society whose aim is to block Islam. The center of this new group should be a new leadership, the leadership which first came in the person of the Prophet himself, peace be on him, and after him was delegated to those who strove to bring people back to Allah's sovereignty, authority and laws. . . . The Muslim society cannot come into existence simply as a creed in the hearts of individual Muslims, however numerous they may be, unless they become an active, harmonious, and cooperative group, distinct by itself, whose different elements, like the limbs of a human body, work together for its support and expansion, and for its defense against all those elements that attack its system. This group must work under a leadership that is independent of the *jahiliyyah* so it can organize its various efforts in support of one harmonious purpose, and strengthen and widen the Muslims' Islamic character in order to abolish the negative influences of *jahili* life.²¹

VII

By associating itself with the first generation of Muslims in the fashion urged by Qutb, the al Qaeda network conceived itself as a militant vanguard institution, mounting counteroffensives on behalf of the Muslim community. That community, in their view, had been weakened by the influence of savage nonbelievers, whose ways are debased and irreligious. Overcoming them becomes possible only as the vanguard recovers and revives the proper Islamic faith, by grounding all practice—indeed, all existence—in the sacred discourse revealed by God through his prophet.

Finally, we are ready to consider the morning of September 11. No prose can capture the events of that day or the emotions they occasioned. No analysis can soften the impact of steel in flight with tall, but vulnerable towers. No attempt at interpretation can quell one's anguish and sorrow for the thousands buried in the rubble.

It is tempting, in the face of such horror, to regard the authors of these deeds as evil incarnate: persons bereft of reason, decency, or human compassion. Their motives, however—as revealed by the instructions that guided their final days—were intensely and profoundly religious.²² We need to take this fact seriously, uncomfortable though it be, since it can tell us important things about the events of the 11th, the broader conflict of which those events are a part, and also the nature of religion. For if there is one thing they make abundantly clear, it is that religion and ethics are not indivisible.²³ Rather than being a divine and unailing ground of morality, religion begins with a human discourse that constructs itself as divine and unailing, through which deeds—any deeds—can be defined as moral. It was their religion that persuaded Mohamed Atta and eighteen others that the carnage they perpetrated was not just an ethical act, but a sacred duty.

The religion in question was not a monolithic entity that can be labeled “Islam.” Rather, these men embraced an extremely militant reformulation of maximalist currents within Islam. To be sure, there are those who consider this style of Islam—which others have styled “Islamist”—to be Islam proper, and who polemically characterize all other styles as adulterations and perversions of one sort or another. But we need not repeat that error, any more than we must accept their view of the West—America, above all—as monolithically minimalist and utterly debased in its style of religiosity.

This construction has roots in Qutb’s *Milestones* (1964) and can be traced a bit further to Hasan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, and Abul Ala Mawdudi, who founded the Jamaat-i-Islami about 1941.²⁴ More recently, as American power has impinged ever further on the Muslim world, resentment has grown, along with a more aggressive discourse that constitutes the United States as the antithesis of Islam and of religion in general. In that discourse America becomes the Great Satan, a monstrous entity responsible for a global flood of impiety and profanation, as witnessed in the blatant sexuality and random violence of the popular culture it so happily (and profitably) exports.

I want to suggest not only that Mohamed Atta and his comrades understood America in these terms (that much is clear enough), but also that their view found expression in the targets they chose: the Pentagon and World Trade Towers, central emblems of American military and economic might. I also think the minimal armaments they carried—a few knives and box cutters—have more than technical significance. Indeed, the assailants’ technological impoverishment constitutes a sign to be read and may well have been meant to be so.²⁵

In effect, these men drew a stark contrast between themselves and those they attacked, dramatizing the differences between two ideal-types of society and culture. As men of unshakable faith, armed only with the most humble tools, they presented themselves as metonymic images of a people whose strength lies in their religion, to which all other concerns—economy, politics, technology, and the rest—are distinctly subordinated. The buildings against which they hurled themselves are likewise tropes for a people preoccupied with money, machines, and armies, but shockingly unconcerned with religion.

In their authors’ intentions, the events of September 11 thus constituted an experiment for all to behold, testing two different types of society and two different types of power. To put it more precisely, they measured the relative power of two antithetical cultural formations, as seen from an Islamist perspective: Islam (+ religion/– all else) versus America (– religion/+ all else), in a showdown encounter. The results were instantaneously relayed throughout the globe, thanks to the technology and communications network of the latter party. Predictably, those results were read in different fashions, reflecting the predispositions of the readers, but many surely took the hijackers’ success as a sign of God’s favor.

In the United States, September 11 was immediately associated to Pearl Harbor and condemned as a sneak attack perpetrated by cowards and villains. While hideously destructive, it was not a knockout blow, but one that alerted a sleeping, peaceful giant to a terrible danger. Once roused, that giant could be counted on to marshal its forces and wage a relentless campaign to rid the world of this evil. The analogy has its points, particularly in its sense of a resilient America under attack, but it also has its problems. Chief of these, I think, is its disinterest in the attackers’ intentions. In December 1941 the Japanese general staff meant to deliver a definitive first strike that would end the war with a single blow by crippling American military capacities. Those who planned and executed the attacks of September 11 can hardly have expected to do anything on that order.

Rather, as I have suggested, (their goal was to make a point) to demonstrate that, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, they possessed a power infinitely superior to their adversary’s and of an entirely different order. In contrast to the imperial Japanese, the Islamists designed their assault more for sign value than use value.²⁶ Their point was not so much to kill people, destroy buildings, and shatter defenses (although their results along these lines were hardly negligible), but to show the world how awesome was the form of power they—and they alone—possessed. From the perspective

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of those who executed the attacks, September 11 was meant to avoid the Japanese mistakes of 1941. Not Pearl Harbor: they were meant to be Hiroshima. That is to say, a spectacular event in which sign value and use value supported each other and were meant to display power that was not only overwhelming and decisive, but unprecedented and incomparable. Those who suffered such attacks were presumably meant first to surrender and thereafter to refashion their culture after that of the victors.

Symmetric Dualisms: Bush and bin Laden on October 7

I

On Sunday, October 7, 2001, less than a month after the attacks of September 11, President Bush announced the American military response in a televised address (appendix B). Within hours there came a riposte from Osama bin Laden, who had prepared a videotape in anticipation of such military action and conveyed it to the widely viewed Arabic language network al-Jazeera, with instructions that it should be released shortly after Bush's broadcast (appendix C).

Within the Muslim world, the bin Laden tape met an enthusiastic reception, and it presented many Westerners with their first sustained, relatively unmediated view of this man. Although his language and self-presentation were primarily aimed at a Muslim audience, bin Laden's charisma was still evident, even to a Western audience relatively unfamiliar with the cultural codes on which he drew and relatively unsympathetic to the arguments he offered. Given that the tape showed him as articulate in his speech, coherent in his views, passionate in his commitments, also able to rebut Bush on certain points and to highlight others the president chose to ignore, it complicated attempts to demonize him. Treating control of the airwaves as a military objective, the Bush administration quickly prevailed on American TV networks not to broadcast any further tapes from bin Laden. Rather, they should limit themselves to excerpts only, accompanied by "appropriate commentary" by responsible journalists, who could be counted on to tell the desired story. Government officials also pressured print media to adopt similar policies.¹

The censorship thus imposed effectively deprived most Americans of the opportunity to hear bin Laden and to improve their regrettably slim and shallow understanding of this man: his grievances, goals, dreams, and delusions; his relative degree of rationality, as compared to the genuinely monstrous qualities of his *ressentiment*.² Further exposure might make him all the more repugnant to American audiences or might enhance his charismatic aura, but it would surely help create a better-informed public: the basis of any democratic society and the proper ground from which policy ought to

they voice most fervently when under attack from religions of revolution. Thus, for instance, immediately after the suppression of the Eight Trigrams Rebellion, the emperor Chia-ch'ing proclaimed that beyond the Confucian social and moral principles, "no so-called religion exists, and outside the principles of nature and the laws of the ruler, happiness may not be sought after; happiness proceeds from complying with orthodoxy, and misfortune from following heresy."⁶⁴

As scholars, we are not bound to accept such formulations. That we have done so in the past, in some measure at least, is only the gauge of how powerful is such propaganda.

*Final Instructions to the Hijackers of September 11,
Found in the Luggage of Mohamed Atta and Two Other Copies*

§1 In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate. . . . In the name of God, of myself and of my family. . . . I pray to you God to forgive me from all my sins, to allow me to glorify you in every possible way.

§2 Remember the battle of the prophet . . . against the infidels, as he went on building the Islamic state.

THE LAST NIGHT

§3 Making an oath to die and renew your intentions. Shave excess hair from the body and wear cologne. Shower.

§4 Make sure you know all aspects of the plan well, and expect the response, or a reaction, from the enemy.

§5 Read al-Tawba and Anfal [suras 8 and 9, traditional war chapters from the Quran] and reflect on their meanings and remember all of the things God has promised for the martyrs.

§6 Remind your soul to listen and obey [all divine orders] and remember that you will face decisive situations that might prevent you from 100 per cent obedience, so tame your soul, purify it, convince it, make it understand, and incite it. God said: "Obey God and His Messenger, and do not fight amongst yourselves or else you will fail. And be patient, for God is with the patient."¹

§7 Pray during the night and be persistent in asking God to give you victory, control and conquest, and that He may make your task easier and not expose us.

§8 Remember God frequently, and the best way to do it is to read the Holy Qur'an, according to all scholars, as far as I know. It is enough for us that it [the Quran] is the words of the Creator of the Earth and the plants, the One that you will meet [on Judgment Day].

§9 Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called "this world" [or "this life"]. The time for play is over and the serious time is upon us. How much time have we wasted in our lives? Shouldn't we take advantage of these last hours to offer good deeds and obedience?

§10 You should feel complete tranquility, because the time between you and your marriage [in heaven] is very short. Afterwards begins the happy life, where God is satisfied with you, and eternal bliss “in the company of the prophets, the companions, the martyrs and the good people, who are all good company.”² Ask God for his mercy and be optimistic, because [the Prophet], peace be upon him, used to prefer optimism in all his affairs.

§11 Keep in mind that, if you fall into hardship, how will you act and how will you remain steadfast and remember that you will return to God and remember that anything that happens to you could never be avoided, and what did not happen to you could never have happened to you. This test from Almighty God is to raise your level [levels of heaven] and erase your sins. And be sure that it is a matter of moments, which will then pass, God willing, so blessed are those who win the great reward of God. Almighty God said: “Did you think you could go to heaven before God knows whom amongst you have fought for Him and are patient?”³

§12 Remember the words of Almighty God: “You were looking to the battle before you engaged in it, and now you see it with your own two eyes.” Remember: “How many small groups beat big groups by the will of God.”⁴ And His words: “If God gives you victory, no one can beat you. And if He betrays you, who can give you victory without Him? So the faithful put their trust in God.”⁵

§13 Remind yourself of the supplications and of your brethren and ponder their meanings. (The morning and evening supplications, and the supplications of [entering] a town, and the [unclear] supplications, and the supplications said before meeting the enemy.)

§14 Bless your body with some verses of the Qur’an [done by reading verses into one’s hands and then rubbing the hands over whatever is to be blessed], the luggage, clothes, the knife, your personal effects, your ID, passport, and all your papers.

§15 Check your weapon before you leave and long before you leave. (You must make your knife sharp and must not discomfort your animal during the slaughter.)

§16 Tighten your clothes [a reference to making sure his clothes will cover his private parts at all times], since this is the way of the pious generations after the Prophet. They would tighten their clothes before battle. Tighten your shoes well, wear socks so that your feet will be solidly in your shoes. All of these are worldly things [that humans can do to control their fate, although God decrees what will work and what won’t] and the rest is left to God, the best One to depend on.

§17 Pray the morning prayer in a group and ponder the great rewards of that prayer. Make supplications afterwards, and do not leave your apartment unless you have performed ablution before leaving, because the angels will ask for your forgiveness as long as you are in a state of ablution, and will pray for you. This saying of the Prophet was mentioned by An-Nawawi in his book, *The Best of Supplications*. Read the words of God: “Did you think that We created you for no reason . . .” from the Al-Mu’minun Chapter.⁶

THE SECOND STEP

§18 When the taxi takes you to (M) [this initial could stand for *matar*, airport in Arabic] remember God constantly while in the car. (Remember the supplication for entering a car, for entering a town, the supplication of place and other supplications.)

§19 When you have reached (M) and have left the taxi, say a supplication of place [“Oh Lord, I ask you for the best of this place, and ask you to protect me from its evils”], and everywhere you go say that prayer and smile and be calm, for God is with the believers. And the angels protect you without you feeling anything. Say this supplication: “God is more dear than all of His creation.” And say: “Oh Lord, protect me from them as You wish.” And say: “Oh Lord, take your anger out on [the enemy] and we ask You to protect us from their evils.” And say: “Oh Lord, block their vision from in front of them, so that they may not see.” And say: “God is all we need, He is the best to rely upon.” Remember God’s words: “Those to whom the people said, ‘The people have gathered to get you, so fear them,’ but that only increased their faith and they said, God is all we need, He is the best to rely upon.”⁷ After you say that, you will find [unclear] as God promised this to his servants who say this supplication:

- 1) They will come back [from battle] with God’s blessings
- 2) They were not harmed
- 3) And God was satisfied with them.⁸

§20 God says: “They came back with God’s blessings, were not harmed, and God was satisfied with them, and God is ever-blessing.”⁹

§21 All of their equipment and gates and technology will not prevent, nor harm, except by God’s will. The believers do not fear such things. The only ones that fear it are the allies of Satan, who are the brothers of the devil. They

have become their allies, God save us, for fear is a great form of worship, and the only one worthy of it is God. He is the only one who deserves it. He said in the verses: "This is only the Devil scaring his allies"¹⁰ who are fascinated with Western civilisation, and have drank the love [of the West] like they drink water [unclear] and have become afraid of their weak equipment, "so fear them not, and fear Me, if you are believers."¹¹

§22 Fear is a great worship. The allies of God do not offer such worship except for the one God, who controls everything, [unclear] with total certainty that God will weaken the schemes of non-believers. God said: "God will weaken the schemes of the non-believers."¹²

§23 You must remember your brothers with all respect. No one should notice that you are making the supplication, "There is no God but God," because if you say it 1,000 times no one will be able to tell whether you are quiet or remember God. And among its miracles is what the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "Whoever says, 'There is no God but God,' with all his heart, goes to heaven." The prophet, peace be upon him, said: "If you put all the worlds and universes on one side of the balance, and 'No God but God' on the other, 'No God but God' will weigh more heavily." You can repeat these words confidently, and this is just one of the strengths of these words. Whoever thinks deeply about these words will find that they have no dots [in the Arabic letter] and this is just one of its greatnesses, for words that have dots in them carry less weight than those that do not. And it is enough that these are the words of monotheism, which will make you steadfast in battle [unclear] as the prophet, peace be upon him, and his companions, and those who came after them, God willing, until the Day of Judgment.

§24 Do not seem confused or show signs of nervous tension. Be happy, optimistic, calm because you are heading for a deed that God loves and will accept. It will be the day, God willing, you spend with the women of paradise.

§25 [poetry] Smile in the face of hardship young man / For you are heading toward eternal paradise

§26 You must remember to make supplications wherever you go, and anytime you do anything, and God is with his faithful servants, He will protect them and make their tasks easier, and give them success and control, and victory, and everything . . .

THE THIRD PHASE

§27 When you ride the (T) [probably for *tayyara*, airplane in Arabic], before your foot steps in it, and before you enter it, you make a prayer and supplications. Remember that this is a battle for the sake of God. As the prophet,

peace be upon him, said, "An action for the sake of God is better than all of what is in this world." When you step inside the (T), and sit in your seat, begin with the known supplications that we have mentioned before. Be busy with the constant remembrance of God. God said: "Oh ye faithful, when you find the enemy be steadfast, and remember God constantly so that you may be successful."¹³ When the (T) moves, even slightly, toward (Q) [unknown reference], say the supplication of travel. Because you are traveling to Almighty God, so be attentive on this trip.

§28 Then [unclear] it takes off. This is the moment that both groups come together.¹⁴ So remember God, as He said in His book: "Oh Lord, pour your patience upon us and make our feet steadfast and give us victory over the infidels."¹⁵ And His words: "And the only thing they said Lord, forgive our sins and excesses and make our feet steadfast and give us victory over the infidels."¹⁶ And His prophet said: "Oh Lord, You have revealed the book, You move the clouds, You gave us victory over the enemy, conquer them and give us victory over them." Give us victory and make the ground shake under their feet. Pray for yourself and all your brothers that they may be victorious and hit their targets and ask God to grant you martyrdom facing the enemy, not running away from it,¹⁷ and for Him to grant you patience and the feeling that anything that happens to you is for Him.

§29 Then every one of you should prepare to carry out his role in a way that would satisfy God. You should clench your teeth, as the pious early generations did.

§30 When the confrontation begins, strike like champions who do not want to go back to this world. Shout, "Allahu Akbar," because this strikes fear in the hearts of the non-believers. God said: "Strike above the neck, and strike at all of their extremities."¹⁸ Know that the gardens of paradise are waiting for you in all their beauty, and the women of paradise are waiting, calling out, "Come hither, friend of God." They have dressed in their most beautiful clothing.

§31 If God decrees that any of you are to slaughter, dedicate the slaughter to your fathers and [unclear], because you have obligations toward them. Do not disagree, and obey. If you slaughter, do not cause the discomfort of those you are killing, because this is one of the practices of the prophet, peace be upon him. On one condition: that you do not become distracted by [unclear] and neglect what is greater, paying attention to the enemy. That would be treason, and would do more damage than good. If this happens, the deed at hand is more important than doing that, because the deed is an obligation, and [the other thing] is optional. And an obligation has priority over an option.

§32 Do not seek revenge for yourself. Strike for God's sake. One time Ali bin Abi Talib [a companion and close relative of the prophet Muhammad], fought with a non-believer. The non-believer spit on Ali, may God bless him. Ali [unclear] his sword, but did not strike him. When the battle was over, the companions of the prophet asked him why he had not smitten the non-believer. He said, "After he spat at me, I was afraid I would be striking at him in revenge for myself, so I lifted my sword." After he renewed his intentions, he went back and killed the man. This means that before you do anything, make sure your soul is prepared to do everything for God only.

§33 Then implement the way of the prophet in taking prisoners. Take prisoners and kill them. As Almighty God said: "No prophet should have prisoners until he has soaked the land with blood. You want the bounties of this world [in exchange for prisoners] and God wants the other world [for you], and God is all-powerful, all-wise."¹⁹

§34 If everything goes well, every one of you should pat the other on the shoulder in confidence that (M) and (T) number (K). Remind your brothers that this act is for Almighty God. Do not confuse your brothers or distract them. He should give them glad tidings and make them calm, and remind them [of God] and encourage them. How beautiful it is for one to read God's words, such as: "And those who prefer the afterlife over this world should fight for the sake of God."²⁰ And His words: "Do not suppose that those who are killed for the sake of God are dead; they are alive . . ."²¹ And others. Or they should sing songs to boost their morale, as the pious first generations did in the throes of battle, to bring calm, tranquillity and joy to the hearts of his brothers.

§35 Do not forget to take a bounty, even if it is a glass of water to quench your thirst or that of your brothers, if possible. When the hour of reality approaches, the zero hour, [unclear] and wholeheartedly welcome death for the sake of God. Always be remembering God. Either end your life while praying, seconds before the target, or make your last words: "There is no God but God, Muhammad is His messenger."

§36 Afterwards, we will all meet in the highest heaven, God willing.

§37 If you see the enemy as strong, remember the groups [that had formed a coalition to fight the prophet Muhammad]. They were 10,000. Remember how God gave victory to his faithful servants. He said: "When the faithful saw the groups, they said, this is what God and the prophet promised, they said the truth. It only increased their faith."²²

§38 And may the peace of God be upon the prophet.

CHAPTER ONE

Lecture first presented at the University of Copenhagen, November 14, 2001, subsequently offered at the University of Colorado, Department of Religious Studies, and the University of California, Santa Cruz, Program in History of Consciousness.

1. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90; first published in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966).

2. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 1 ("The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," pp. 27–54). This was first published in *Man* (1983) but was more widely read and acquired more force when combined with the other materials in this book. It is surely no accident that in two different generations, the most telling critiques of attempts to define "religion" have come from scholars primarily concerned with Islam, who perceive the discriminatory features of others' formulations. Thus, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), in appreciation and critical response to which, see Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*," *History of Religions* 40 (2001): 205–22.

3. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. Vol. 1: *The Rise of Modern Paganism*; Vol. 2: *The Science of Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966–69).

4. Kant treats these issues most explicitly in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), although he approaches it more obliquely in earlier writings. Asad deals with Kant on several occasions but does not cite this work directly, preferring to focus his attention on the 1784 essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" and the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Genealogies of Religion*, pp. 41–43, 201–8, 227–28).

5. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p. 29.

6. A recent exception is Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Heinemann, 2001), which builds on his earlier *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). The latter volume seems to have been under way before Asad's critique gained currency; likewise, E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

7. William Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of "Social Justice in Islam"* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 1. *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb's first major work, was initially published in 1949. Subsequent editions, particularly those of 1958 and 1964, show substantial revision, reflecting Qutb's increasingly Islamist views. Shepard's translation is based

on the 1964 edition but discusses the process of revision. An English translation of the first edition is also available: Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*, trans. John Hardie, rev. by Hamid Algar (Oneonta, N.Y.: Islamic Publications International, 2000).

8. The fullest discussion of Qutb's time in the United States is John Calvert's "The World Is an Undutiful Boy!": Sayyid Qutb's American Experience," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11, no. 1 (March 2000): 87–103. Also useful are Ahmed Salah al-Din Mousalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992), especially chap. 1; and Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 92–137.

9. With regard to this concept, I have benefited from reading an unpublished paper by William Shepard, "Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," presented at annual meetings of the American Research Center in Egypt (Chicago, April 23–25, 1999). The most important and frequently cited of Qutb's later work is his *Ma'alim fi al-tariq*, usually translated *Milestones*, as in the revised English translation by Ahmad Zaki Hammad (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1990). In the introduction to that work, he explicates the nature of *Jahiliyyah* and constitutes a maximalist view of Islam as its antithesis and unique antidote.

If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *jahiliyyah* [ignorance of the divine guidance], and all the marvellous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish this ignorance. This *jahiliyyah* is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth. It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others. It is now not in that simple and primitive form of the ancient *jahiliyyah*, but takes the form of claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed. The result of this rebellion against the authority of God is the oppression of His creatures. . . . In this respect, Islam's way of life is unique, for in systems other than Islam, some people worship others in some form or another. Only in the Islamic way of life do all men become free from the servitude of some men to others and devote themselves to the worship of God alone, deriving guidance from Him alone, and bowing before Him alone. This is where the roads separate. . . . (pp. 8–9)

10. It is useful to cite Calvert's description of Greeley, a community of twenty thousand at the time: "Established as a self-declared utopian community in 1870, the city proudly maintained in the late 1940s the moral rigor, temperance and civic-mindedness that were the hallmarks of its founding fathers. . . . Greeley's first settlers had imposed a total ban on alcohol which was still in effect during Qutb's stay. In the minds of many Americans in the postwar era, the qualities of Greeley represented the best the United States had to offer" (Calvert, "The World Is an Undutiful Boy!" p. 95).

11. This passage, which has been frequently cited, initially appeared in the second of three articles Qutb published upon his return to Egypt, entitled "Amerika aliaḏḥī ra'ayt: Fīmīzān al-qiyām al-insāniyyah—2" ["The America I Saw: Weighed in the Balance of Human Values, Part 2"] *al-Risalah* Year 19, vol. 2, no. 959 (November 19, 1951), p. 1304. The translation I have quoted comes from Robert Worth, "The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror," *New York Times*, October 13, 2001, p. A15.

12. Regarding Qutb's broader thought on this topic, I have benefited from William Shepard, "Gender Relations in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," unpublished paper presented at meetings of the Middle East Studies Association (December 1995).

13. Quoted in Mousalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, pp. 26–27. In the subsequent discussion, Qutb assesses why the disjuncture between the religious and the social was evident in the events he observed at Greeley.

Nothing in this is strange because the priest does not feel that his job is different from that of a stage manager or store manager. Success is first and prior to anything else. Means are unimportant; for success brings him good consequences: money and prestige. The greater the number of church-goers, the greater his income, prestige, and influence in the town. (Ibid., pp. 27–28)

14. There is a large, extremely uneven literature on the topic of "fundamentalism." The best works include Martin Riesebrodt, *Pious Passions: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); and Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). The connotations of this term have become so strong, however, that I think it preferable to avoid it altogether.

15. My preference for "discourse" over "belief" is based on two arguments. First is an epistemological consideration. Students of religion have no unmediated access to the beliefs of those they study, nor to any other aspects of their interiority. Rather, we come to know something of those beliefs only as they find external (always imperfect and sometimes quite distorted) expression in acts of discourse and practice. Regarding that of which one can have no direct knowledge, scholars cannot speak with any confidence and should—in their professional capacity, at least—perforce remain silent. Second, an ontological and ontogenetic observation: Belief almost never arises *de novo* in pristine interior reflection and experience, but generally follows exposure to the discourse of significant others. These include parents, above all, but also friends, family, and clergy, who signal what they believe and what they (also the institutions and traditions to which they belong) believe ought be believed. As these statements are received and metabolized by those to whom they are addressed, they are internalized as beliefs, but in this process, discourse is both logically and chronologically prior to belief.

16. Heuristically clear, the line between religious and nonreligious discourse may become blurred in practice, as when speakers make claim to absolute truths without explicit gestures to the transcendent, as in the case of Marxists with extreme confidence in historic dialectics. Buddhism offers another instructive example. Insofar as the teachings of the Buddha are constituted as something achieved through the most serious, sustained reflection undertaken by the most gifted of all sentient beings—but someone regarded as still human—these remain the basis of a philosophy and not a religion. When those same teachings are represented as the product of a person and/or process more than human in nature, Buddhism has taken the first and most important step to reformulating itself as a religion. Similar points can be made about varying forms of nationalism.

17. On September 11 Mohamed Atta took two flights, one from Maine to Boston and the second from Boston to Los Angeles (American Airlines Flight 11). In Maine he checked his baggage through only as far as Boston, where it remained until discovered. Although other explanations are possible (an error made in haste, perhaps), it seems most likely that he intended for the

suitcase to be discovered, so that the instructions and his will (drafted in April 1996) would be read and supply others with the basis for interpreting his life and final actions. The will contains eighteen numbered items, all of which assert his identity as a good Muslim. The original Arabic text has never been released, and only translated excerpts appeared in the American press. A full translation in German was published in *Der Spiegel*, October 1, 2001. An English translation from this German text may be found at http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/dailynews/WTC_atta_will.html.

18. The second copy to be recovered was found in the vehicle used by Nawaf Alhazmi before he boarded American Airlines Flight 77 in Washington, and the third at the crash site of United Airlines Flight 93 in Stony Creek Township, Pennsylvania. Facsimiles of the original Arabic holograph were made available by the FBI at www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel01/letter.htm. Although press reports consistently referred to a five-page document, the FBI website reproduced only four, the first page of the original apparently having been withheld.

19. Three authoritative oral traditions (*hadith*) are also introduced, always framed as words of the Prophet (§§23, 27, 28).

20. Sura 9.12–14; my emphasis. Cf. the use of Scripture in §30: “When the confrontation begins, strike like champions who do not want to go back to this world. Shout, ‘Allahu Akbar,’ because this strikes fear in the hearts of the non-believers. God said: ‘Strike above the neck, and strike at all of their extremities.’” The Quranic passage cited is sura 8.12–14, which reads as follows:

When the Lord was revealing to the angels,
 “I am with you; so confirm the believers.
 I shall cast into the unbelievers’ hearts
 Terror; so smite above the necks, and smite every finger of them!”
 That, because they had made a breach
 with God and with His Messenger; and
 whosoever makes a breach with God and with
 His Messenger, surely God is terrible in retribution.
 That for you; therefore taste it; and
 That the chastisement of the Fire is for the unbelievers (my emphasis).

The promise of chastisement by fire for unbelievers is especially ominous when set in homologic relation to events of September 11.

21. Qutb, *Milestones*, pp. 38–40. See further the discussion of Shepard, “Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb,” pp. 12–15.

22. This is not to say their motives were exclusively religious. Anger over American foreign policy toward Palestine and Iraq, for instance, surely played some role in prompting the attacks of September 11. Here, however, I would make two points: (1) Such considerations go completely unmentioned in the instructions text (perhaps because they are taken for granted); and (2) in other texts where they do enter, the discourse itself conflates “religious” and “political” aspects, which can only be separated by an outside observer insensitive to their intimate interrelation. Thus, to pursue the example, “Palestine” and “Iraq” do not figure simply as nation-states and political entities. Rather, they are of concern precisely because they are Muslim nations or, more simply, part of “Islam” (*dar al-Islam*, on the significance of which, see the discussion in chapter 3).

(23) This, of course, is a classic theme, treated not only in Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, but also in different ways and to different purposes in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trem-*

bling, Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, and Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. Professional students of religion have often been a good deal more superficial in treating the issues raised by such troubling practices as collective suicide, spousal immolation, and clitoridectomy, where they can usually be counted on to smooth out the apparent contradiction between the ethical and the religious. Toward that end, scholars who harbor a distinctly nonacademic reverence for their object of study can be counted on to deploy one of two favored arguments: (1) It is ethnocentric to ignore or undervalue the profound significance these practices have in their proper cultural context (i.e., being religious, they must be good); and (2) the perpetrators are frauds, hypocrites, dupes, or members of “cults” (i.e., being bad, they can’t *really* be religious). In either case, the goal is the same and the project transparently apologetic.

24. For summary discussions of these and other related figures, see Ali Rahnama, ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books, 1994). Specifically on the Muslim Brotherhood, see Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; 1st ed. 1969).

25. §21 of the instructions draws a related contrast between those whose strength is grounded in religious faith and those who depend on technology.

All of their equipment and gates and technology will not prevent, nor harm, except by God’s will. The believers do not fear such things. The only ones that fear it are the allies of Satan, who are the brothers of the devil. They have become their allies, God save us, for fear is a great form of worship, and the only one worthy of it is God. He is the only one who deserves it. He said in the verses: “This is only the Devil scaring his allies,” who are fascinated with Western civilisation, and have drunk the love [of the West] like they drink water [unclear] and have become afraid of their weak equipment, “so fear them not, and fear Me, if you are believers.”

26. Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer’s discussion of the theatricality of much religio-political violence, in *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 119–44.

CHAPTER TWO

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1. Paul Farhi, “The Networks, Giving Aid to the Enemy?” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2001, p. C1.

2. I mean this term in its strictly Nietzschean sense, as developed in the *Genealogy of Morals*, with particular reference to the priestly perspective.

3. The genealogy of this stereotype can be traced at least to the Mahdist insurrection of 1884–85 in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. When Muhammad Ahmad, self-proclaimed Mahdi (salvific hero), defeated the English army under General Charles Gordon and captured Khartoum, caricatures of extraordinary proportions were used to rally English popular opinion in the wake of this disaster.

4. The most important document is the “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupy-