

# HOLY TERRORS

Thinking about Religion after September 11

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 deprivilege this hegemon, opening space for secular arts and sciences, not to speak of political economy.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup> And since he wrote his *Genealogies of Religion*, most have heeded his counsel.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

Qutb was not disturbed simply by the eroticism he took to be indecorous and improper.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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 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.<sup>14</sup> The other, by contrast, is 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.<sup>15</sup> 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:

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

authority.<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 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).<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

## 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,



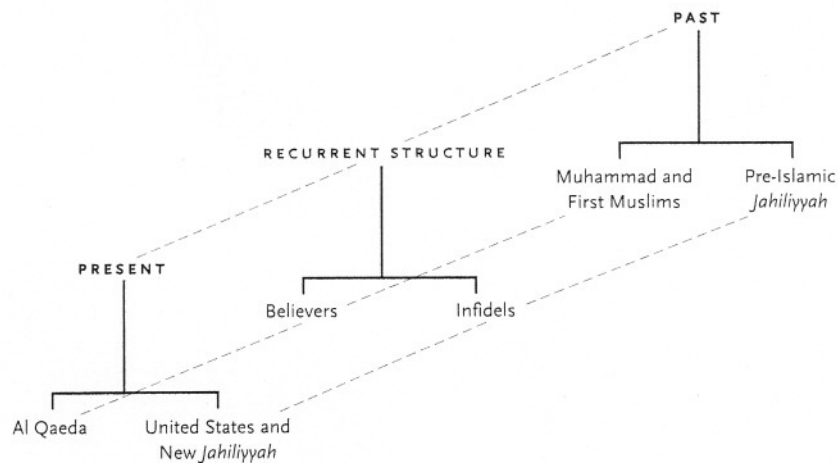


FIGURE 1.1 Alignment of contemporary struggles with those of the early Muslim era.

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.<sup>21</sup>

## 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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

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.

## 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 alladhī ra'ayt: Fīmizān al-qiyyam 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—perform 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 to 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](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](http://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 homologous 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

First presented at the University of Chicago, M.A. Program in Social Sciences, October 22, 2001, pieces of which were published as “The Other War: The One of Words,” *Kansas City Star*, October 23, 2001, available at [www.kcstar.com/item/pages/opinion.pat/opinion/3acd143c.a23.html](http://www.kcstar.com/item/pages/opinion.pat/opinion/3acd143c.a23.html). Later versions were presented to the History of Religions workshop at the University of Chicago and a conference on “Apocalypticism and Violence” organized at Yale University.

1. Paul Farhi, “The Networks, Giving Aid to the Enemy?” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2001, p. C7.

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-