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HOUSES OF WORSHIP

The Echo Effect

By ERIC ORMSBY

Updated Oct. 19, 2001 12:01 a.m. ET

In 633 A.D., a year after the Prophet's death, the general of the newly formed Muslim armies wrote a letter to the Persian emperor. "Submit to our authority," he declared, "and we shall leave you and your land and go against others. If not, you will be conquered against your will by men who love death as you love life."

The general was Khalid ibn al-Walid, who had once opposed Muhammad but who upon becoming a Muslim tumbled dynasties with the convert's fiery zeal. To the emperor the letter must have seemed the ravings of a lunatic. How could the Persian Empire, which had stood for more than 400 years, be threatened by such upstarts as the Arabs, whom Persians with sophisticated disdain considered mere "lizard eaters"?

Earlier this month -- nearly 1,400 years later -- Suleiman Abu Ghaith, a spokesman for Osama bin Laden, held a news conference in which he threatened the West and Americans in particular by claiming that there were "thousands of young men" eager to become martyrs, who "loved death as you love life."

The allusion was no coincidence. Without doubt, the spokesman had the words of Khalid ibn al-Walid echoing in his memory. For Muslims of the extremist persuasion of Osama bin Laden and his Taliban protectors, Islam is engaged in a primordial combat with a malignant enemy, an enemy who differs little from early adversaries of the Prophet himself.

In the Quran, these enemies are dubbed "the hypocrites," and Osama used the term in his defiant videotaped speech following the first air raids on Afghanistan. Those who attack him -- absurdly enough, to oppose him is to oppose Islam -- belong to this hated category. In Arabic the word has connotations harsher than "hypocrite," which to us denotes at worst a philandering evangelist.

The word is *munafiq* (plural: *munafiqun*), and it occurs dozens of times in the Quran to designate those who appeared to accept the teaching of Muhammad but then betrayed it, usually surreptitiously. The word carries other overtones: arrogance, duplicity, apostasy. Our closest equivalent with any force would be perhaps to call someone "a Judas."

The Quran is severe on the fate reserved for the *munafiqun*, especially when these backsliders are from the "People of the Book," that is, Jews and Christians, who are so called not only because they have the Bible but also because that "book" is seen by Muslims as initiating the unique prophetic tradition that culminates, once and for all, in Muhammad.

Here is what God says about such miscreants in Chapter 59 of the Quran: "Have you not seen how those who are 'hypocrites' tell their brothers from among the People of the Book when they fall into disbelief, 'If you are driven out, we will go out with you'? . . . God bears witness that they are liars!" And

in another chapter Allah commands: "O Prophet! Wage jihād against the infidels and the hypocrites and be harsh against them. Their abode will be in hell."

For Muslim zealots, little has changed since the seventh century, when Muhammad battled to establish his fledgling faith in Mecca and Medina. To use the word as bin Laden does suggests a hatred born out of a sense of betrayal. He sees himself as another Muhammad combating renegades and apostates to establish the truth. And he can refer to the zealots he commands as "martyrs" and "stars in the firmament" because he views them not as the suicidal mass murderers they are but as warriors for the faith. To them and to Osama we in the West are the mortal enemies of Islam because we are "People of the Book" who have gone dangerously astray.

Like the Jews of Medina whom Muhammad thought would be his strongest allies and first converts but who betrayed him (and whom he put to the sword), we have unwittingly become the villains in an ancient drama of good against evil most of us didn't know was occurring.

No doubt the Persian emperor laughed at the letter of the upstart Muslim general, but within 20 years he was driven from his throne, hunted down and butchered. If a barbaric but well disciplined force who "love death as we love life" could do it in the seventh century, one can almost hear bin Laden arguing, why not in the 21st?

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