

Why Radical Muslims Hate You – Responding to Islamic Attitudes

Rusty Wright looks at the historical roots of Muslim hatred of American and the West. He points out that there are cultural, political, religious and psychological factors combining to create the current attitudes among Muslim people. Understanding the roots behind the feelings of some Muslims toward the West may help us in reaching out to our Muslim co-workers and neighbors.

Historical Roots of Hatred

Do you remember how you felt on September 11, 2001? You likely saw images of jets crashing into buildings, people jumping from skyscrapers, the towers collapsing. What feelings did you experience? Confusion? Anger? Depression? TV showed some Palestinians celebrating. One Hamas publication wrote, “Allah has answered our prayers.”[\[1\]](#) In London, one Muslim group circulated stickers praising the “magnificent 19,” the hijackers.[\[2\]](#)

Chances are, you are a target of this hatred. If you are a Westerner, an American, a non-Muslim, or a Muslim of a different stripe than they, then some radical Muslims hate you. Why? The answer is complex and involves history, culture, politics, religion, and psychology.

Of course, many – some would say most – Muslims are peace loving and deplore terrorism. Islam is quite diverse.[\[3\]](#) Extremist Muslims do not represent all Muslims any more than white supremacists represent all Christians. Not all “radical” Muslims are violent or hateful. But understanding extremist Muslim hatred is essential to interpreting our post-9/11

world. This article examines that hatred and offers a biblical response.

In his October 2001 video, Osama bin Ladin mentioned the “humiliation and disgrace” tormenting Islam for “more than eighty years.” Princeton Near Eastern scholar Bernard Lewis notes that the reference likely puzzled many Westerners. Many Muslims – for whom Islamic history carries divine significance – understood. Bin Ladin referred to the 1918 defeat of the once- mighty Ottoman Empire and to British and French partitioning of Ottoman territory. Secular Turks soon also abolished the caliphate, or succession of rulers of all Sunni Islam. Desecration of this symbol of Muslim unity has pained many Muslims ever since.[\[4\]](#)

For centuries, the Islamic world had displayed military, economic and scientific superiority. But European development eventually overtook Islam.[\[5\]](#) Today, United States ties with Israel and involvement in Saudi Arabia have kindled ire.

Bin Ladin calls on Muslims to “obey God’s command to kill the Americans and plunder their possessions . . . to kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military”[\[6\]](#) He and his sympathizers want to eliminate Western influence and restore their version of Islam to the world.[\[7\]](#)

Socio-cultural Roots of Hatred

History is behind some of the radical Muslim hatred of the West. But so are cultural differences. Would you believe that dancing in an American church helped fuel Muslim anger today?

In 1948, Sayyid Qutb visited the United States for Egypt’s Ministry of Education. His stay left him shocked with what he perceived as moral degeneracy and sexual promiscuity.

He wrote that even American religion was tainted by materialism and consumerism. Churches marketed their services to the public like merchants and entertainers. Success, big

numbers, "fun," and having "a good time" seemed crucial to American churches.{8}

He especially deplored clergy-sanctioned dances at church recreation halls. When the ministers lowered the lights, the dances became hot. Here is Qutb's "PG" description: "The dance is inflamed by the notes of the gramophone . . . the dance-hall becomes a whirl of heels and thighs, arms enfold hips, lips and breasts meet, and the air is full of lust." He cited the famous Kinsey Reports as evidence of American sexual debauchery.{9} Qutb, who was dark skinned, also experienced racism in America.{10}

Back in Egypt, Qutb joined the Muslim Brothers organization.{11} Imprisonment and torture made his writings more militant. Qutb became what Georgetown University religion and international affairs professor John Esposito calls "the architect of radical Islam." {12}

Some Muslim Brotherhood groups, offshoots, and alumni are mainstream and nonviolent. Others have a violent legacy. A militant offshoot,{13} Islamic Jihad, assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. Esposito notes that a radicalized former Muslim Brother, Abdullah Azzam, significantly influenced Usama bin Ladin.{14} Former CIA Middle East case officer Robert Baer observes that a Kuwaiti Muslim Brother, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, became a bin Ladin terror chief.{15}

Secularization, consumerism, materialism, the status of women, sexual mores ... all concern radical Muslims.{16} Bernard Lewis notes that Sayyid Qutb's denunciation of American moral flaws became incorporated into radical Islamic ideology. For instance, he says Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, in calling the U.S. the "Great Satan," was being consistent with the Koranic depiction of Satan not as an "imperialist" or "exploiter" but as a seducer, "the insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men." {17}

Historical, social and cultural factors have influenced radical Muslim hatred of the West. Consider now how global politics stirs the mix.

Political Roots of Hatred

Bernard Lewis – who is not without his critics[{18}](#) – notes an essential difference between Christianity and Islam regarding government and religion. Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of the Christian faith, said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to him. But everything that belongs to God must be given to God.”[{19}](#) For much of history, this has been understood as recognizing the existence of two distinct authorities, one spiritual and the other political.[{20}](#)

But much of Islam has known no such distinction. Muhammad was both a religious and political leader, the Prophet and the head of state. Under his successors, the caliphs, Islam grew into a huge empire and world religion. Islamic shari’a, or Holy Law, deals with power, authority and political philosophy. Specific applications differ among Islamic nations. In an extreme example of this spiritual/political blend, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini once said, “Islam is politics or it is nothing.”[{21}](#)

With this mindset, the Western world and the United States as superpower become to many Muslims the infidel invaders, imperialist bullies who desecrate Islamic states by force. European colonialism, Western imperialism and U. S. policies are frequent Muslim complaints.[{22}](#) Many Muslims deplore the U. S. invasion of Iraq. Of course, U. S. concessions to Israel often are seen as collaboration with an enemy of Islam.

One perceived offense to radical Islam that is sometimes overlooked by Westerners is Western complicity with corrupt rulers of Islamic states. These situations are complex. Oft-mentioned offenses include the 1982 government massacre at the Syrian city of Hama to put down a Muslim Brothers uprising. An

estimated ten to twenty-five thousand died, attracting little Western attention. In 1992, with Western approval, the Algerian military cancelled democratic elections to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front from winning them and established a brutal regime.{23}

Especially galling to radicals is Western complicity with rulers of Saudi Arabia – Islam’s Holy Land – whom they see as warped by greed, graft and moral corruption. One Saudi diplomat noted after 9/11, “What shocks me most is why they hit America and not us.”{24}

But they did hit America, and radical views of politics played an important role.

Religious Roots of Hatred

Still other reasons some radical Muslims hate you involve religion.

Wahhabism, a movement much in the news, was founded by an eighteenth century theologian, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al- Wahhab. Wahhab wanted to purify Islam and return it to its authentic ways. He condemned and burned books contradicting his views. Wahhab’s followers became fiercely exclusive. Their principal focus was not outsiders but insiders, Muslims whom they felt had practiced a “less-pure” form of Islam. They could be vicious, desecrating holy places and slaughtering Muslims who differed.{25}

Wahhabism’s ongoing Saudi links would propel it into international influence. When Saudi forces conquered Arabia in 1925, they controlled Islam’s two most holy cities, Mecca and Medina. When Saudi Arabia became oil-rich, the stage was set. Wahhabism became the “official, state-enforced doctrine of one of the most influential governments in all Islam,”{26} which hosts annual pilgrimages to Mecca involving millions of Muslims from around the world. Saudi oil wealth funded Wahhabi

propagation of their views at home and abroad.[{27}](#) Wahhabism affected both Usama bin Ladin and the Taliban.[{28}](#)

Wahhabism's pervasive influence troubles Princeton's Lewis. Imagine, he says, that the Ku Klux Klan or a similar group took control of Texas and its oil and could widely propagate its version of "Christianity" through heavily endowed schools and colleges.[{29}](#) Georgetown's Esposito distinguishes puritanical, politically conservative Wahhabism from radical, militant Wahhabism.[{30}](#)

Former CIA agent Robert Baer notes that Wahhabi soldiers fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, with U.S. support. There, Wahhabis linked with radical followers of Sayyid Qutb, an alliance Baer likens to "mixing nitroglycerin in a blender."[{31}](#) A new, more militant strain of Wahhabism developed in addition to mainstream Wahabbism, with a new emphasis on taking the fight to outsiders: the infidels and the West.[{32}](#)

After al-Qaeda attacked three housing complexes in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 2003, the Saudi government began to crack down on terrorists and violent rhetoric in the mosques. Initial results were mixed. U. S. Ambassador Robert Jordan reported, "We have noticed lately in influential mosques the imam has condemned terrorism and preached in favor of tolerance, then closed the sermon with 'O God, please destroy the Jews, the infidels and all who support them.'"[{33}](#)

Psychological Roots of Hatred

In addition to the foregoing, there are psychological factors at work in radical Muslim hatred.

Lewis writes, "Almost the entire Muslim world is affected by poverty. . . ."[{34}](#) Georgetown's John Esposito sees "weak economies, illiteracy, and high unemployment"[{35}](#) in many Muslim nations. *Relative deprivation* can be psychologically

debilitating. If you are poor, some theories argue, and you see others more prosperous, you may feel inferior, trapped or depressed.

Reports from the United Nations and the World Bank note that Arab nations fall far behind the West in “job creation, education, technology, and productivity.”[\[36\]](#) (There are, of course, exceptions.) When global media bring pictures of lavish Western life, frustration burns and some extremists lash out. One Egyptian playwright described these extremists as “pathologically jealous.” He said, “They feel like dwarfs, which is why they search for towers and all those who tower mightily.”[\[37\]](#)

Feelings of rejection play a part. Many Western societies have been slow to accept Muslims. The father of shoe bomber Richard Reid said of his son, “He was born here in Britain, like I was. It was distressing to be told things like ‘Go home, nigger.’”[\[38\]](#)

New York Times foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman speaks of a “*poverty of dignity*” affecting even privileged Muslims. Belief in Islam’s superiority contrasted with economic and military disparity in the context of a repressive regime can engender feelings of humiliation, prompting vengeance against the perceived cause.[\[39\]](#)

What is an appropriate biblical response to radical Muslim hatred? A complete answer would take volumes. May I suggest four ideas?

First, *love your enemies*. Jesus of Nazareth taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”[\[40\]](#) It is not emotionally easy for me to love Usama bin Ladin or to pray for him. I have to ask God for strength for that.

Second, *support national defense*. Paul, one of Jesus’ early followers, wrote that governments are to “bear the sword” to subjugate evil.[\[41\]](#) The implications are complex and

debatable, but the principle of defending against attack is biblical.

Third, if you are not a Muslim, *learn about Islam*.^{42} One writer remarked of some of Israeli King David's supporters that they "understood the times."^{43} Paul sought to understand cultural and religious views of his day.^{44}

And fourth, *befriend some Muslims*, perhaps from your neighborhood or workplace. In humility, learn about their families, their hopes and dreams. If appropriate, discuss your respective faiths. You may be surprised at the similarities. And your kindness may generate warmth toward the spirit that drives your kind behavior and speech.^{45}

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Notes

1. *Al-Riswāla*, issue of September 13, 2001; in Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 156-7.
2. Helen Gibson, "Islam's Other Hot Spots: Britain: No Pause in the Recruiting," *TIME.com*, posted September 7, 2003 at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101030915/wpakistan.html>; from *TIME* magazine issue cover date September 15, 2003.
3. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiii, xx, 225-226, 239.
4. Lewis 2003, op. cit., xv-xviii. Bin Laden is not alone in his concern. For example, the founding leader of Ansar al-Islam, a fundamentalist militia in northern Iraq with suspected Al-Qaeda ties, sees his work as part of a lengthy Islamic struggle to restore the caliphate. See Neil

MacFarquhar, "Islamic Militants Said to Infiltrate Iraq to Battle the U.S. Occupiers," *New York Times* (AOL edition), August 13, 2003.

5. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 6-7 ff., especially 18-63.

6. Lewis 2003, op. cit., xxvii.

7. Lewis 2002, op. cit., 164-5.

8. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 76-79.

9. Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Islwām wa-mushkilwāt al-hadwāra* (n.p., 1967), 80ff; in Lewis 2003, op. cit., 78-79.

10. John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 57.

11. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 79, 76.

12. Esposito 1999, op. cit. 135, and personal interview, November 19, 2003.

13. Esposito 1999, op. cit., 272, also calls it a "splinter group."

14. Esposito, personal interview, November 19, 2003; Esposito 2003, op. cit., 7, 19.

15. Robert Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold Our Soul for Saudi Crude* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), 91-128, 195 ff.

16. See Lewis 2002, op. cit., 64-81 for historical perspective on socio-cultural differences between Islam and the West. See Esposito 1999, op. cit., for additional perspective that differs from Lewis' on certain key points. See Thomas A. Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: The World in the Age of*

Terrorism (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 2002/2003), 334, 357, ff., for a contemporary journalist's perspective.

17. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 81. The final quotation in the paragraph to which this note refers, "the insidious tempter...", is from Qur'an CXIV, 4, 5.

18. For example, Esposito 1999, op. cit., 219 ff.

19. Matthew 22:21 NLT.

20. Lewis 2002, op. cit., 97.

21. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 5-8; see also Lewis 2002 op. cit., 96-116, and Esposito 2003, op. cit., 67-68.

22. Esposito 1999, op. cit., 45-73, 222.

23. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 103-112.

24. Baer, op. cit., 166.

25. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 120-124 ff.

26. Ibid., 128.

27. Ibid., 123-128.

28. Esposito 2003, op. cit., 5, 7, 16, 48, 108-109.

29. Ibid., 129.

30. Esposito 2003, op. cit., 49, 111, 115.

31. Baer, op. cit., 89-90. Baer here refers to Wahhabis in Afghanistan mixing with Muslim Brothers. Esposito, personal interview, November 19, 2003, feels it is more precise to say that the Wahhabis there mixed with radical followers of Sayyid Qutb.

32. David Van Biema, "Wahhabism: Toxic Faith?", *TIME.com*, posted September 7, 2003, at

<http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101030915/wwahhabism.html>;
from *TIME* magazine issue cover date September 15, 2003.

33. Lisa Beyer with Scott MacLeod, "Inside the Kingdom," *TIME.com*, posted September 7, 2003, at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,483269,00.html>; from *TIME* magazine issue cover date September 15, 2003.

34. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 113.

35. Esposito 1999, op. cit., 241.

36. Lewis 2003, op. cit., 114.

37. Friedman, op. cit., 216. Friedman takes the quote from an unidentified issue of *TIME*. 38. Ibid., 354-355. Friedman cites *TIME* of February 25, 2002.

39. Ibid., 242-243; 355 ff. The argument is not that all Muslims live in abject poverty. Many Muslim nations are oil-rich. But oil wealth does not always filter throughout society. Beyond finances, feelings of relative lack of power, influence and respect on the world stage contribute to the poverty of dignity, Friedman holds.

40. Matthew 5:44 NASB.

41. Romans 13:1-4 NASB.

42. For an example of a Christian reflecting on the essentials of Islam, see Rick Rood's, "What is Islam?", <http://www.probe.org/probe-answers-e-mail/cults-and-world-religions/what-is-islam.html> and "Probe Answers Our E-mail: Why Do You Lie about Islam?" <http://www.probe.org/probe-answers-e-mail/cults-and-world-religions/why-do-you-lie-about-islam.html>.

43. 1 Chronicles 12:32 NASB.

44. Acts 17:16-34.

45. Colossians 4:5-6.

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