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Bin Laden's Radical Form of Islam

Most Muslims' Interpretations of the Koran Don't Condone Terrorist Violence

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The suspects in last week's attacks in New York and Washington are Muslims who adhered to a version of Islam that sanctions terrorist violence, but it is an interpretation of Islam that is rejected by most other Muslims around the world.

The alleged mastermind of the attacks, the Saudi Arabian fugitive Osama bin Laden, promotes a radical form of Islam whose aim is to create a Muslim world governed by divine laws and totally free of Western cultural or political influences.

To achieve that end, bin Laden has called for a *jihad*, or holy war, against the United States. Three years ago, he issued a religious declaration condoning terrorist attacks on American citizens wherever they are. "You cannot defeat the heretic with this book alone," bin Laden has said, referring to the Koran. "You have to show them the fist."

Such views defy Islam's basic teachings and are based on a selective reading of the Koran, Islamic scholars say. In the faith's early history, military means were used to gain territory for Islam. But forced conversions were never sanctioned. And although the Koran does permit the use of force in self-defense, it prohibits violence against innocent civilians, scholars say.

That prohibition has been stressed by several prominent Muslims in recent days, as they have tried to dispel misconceptions about their faith.

"I cannot sit by and let the world think that Islam is a killing religion," said former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, a convert to Islam. "These radicals are doing things that God is against. Muslims do not believe in violence. If the culprits are Muslim, they have twisted the teachings of Islam. . . . Islam does not promote terrorism or the killing of people."

President Bush also spoke up on the issue yesterday during a visit to the Washington Islamic Center. "These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith," Bush said. "The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace."

Muslims have not always obeyed their faith's ban on terrorist violence. Palestinian suicide bombers are the most glaring example.

But over the centuries, Islam has been no more violent than Christianity, whose history includes the Inquisition, the Crusades and, more recently, the anti-Muslim violence of Yugoslav President

Slobodan Milosevic. Sometimes, Islam has been more tolerant than Christianity. After the famous Muslim leader Saladin expelled the crusaders from Jerusalem in the 12th century, for example, he invited Jews previously expelled by the crusaders back to the city.

Along with Judaism and Christianity, Islam is one of the three monotheistic religions that emerged from the Middle East and spread throughout the world. It began in what is now Saudi Arabia when a businessman named Muhammad received what he believed were divine revelations.

These revelations -- whose fundamental message was submission to the will of one God -- continued, Muslims believe, over a 23-year period until Muhammad's death in 632. Eventually, they were compiled into the Koran.

Islam, an Arabic word meaning "submission," drew on the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, Muslims accept some Old Testament books, including the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, as part of their religious tradition.

They also revere many Jewish prophets, in particular Abraham, as holy men. They believe that Jesus was a holy prophet, but not that he was the son of God. Allah is the Arabic word for God and is also used by Arab Christians.

Islam has no initiation rite or baptism. One becomes a Muslim by making the personal declaration of belief: that there is one God and that Muhammad was his last prophet.

The faith also has no central authority or clerical hierarchy because it teaches that each person has a direct relationship with God with no need for an intermediary.

For centuries, Muslims have sought moral advice and leadership from learned men who studied the Koran and were experts in Islamic law, or *shari'a*. These religious scholars, or *ulama*, can differ widely in their interpretation of some aspects of the Koran and have often been influenced by local customs.

On the issue of women's dress, for example, some scholars read the relevant Koranic verses as requiring that Muslim women cover their hair in public. Other scholars, however, interpret the same verses more liberally, saying they instruct women simply to dress modestly.

Islam reached American shores when Muslim Africans were brought here as slaves in the early 1700s. The country's Muslim population, now estimated at between 5 million and 7 million, has been swollen in recent decades by increasing numbers of immigrants from Muslim countries.

Growing numbers of Americans have been converting to Islam. In the 1930s, African American Elijah Muhammad formed the Nation of Islam, which gained momentum during the civil rights movement in the 1950s. Formed in response to white racism, the Nation of Islam advocated separation from white society.

It was not accepted by orthodox Muslims because of its race-based orientation and because it held that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet of God. One of the Nation of Islam's most famous followers, Malcolm X, split from the organization because of these teachings shortly before his assassination in 1965.

Today, the largest American-led Muslim organizations are the American Muslim Mission -- led by Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Muhammad -- and the Nation of Islam, led by Louis Farrakhan.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam has split into separate denominations. Today, the majority of Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, while the rest follow the second-largest branch, Shi'ah Islam, and smaller denominations. About 85 percent of Islam's 1.2 billion followers are non-Arab. South Asia has the largest Muslim population, with 275 million believers.

Staff writer Hanna Rosin contributed to this report.

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