The Politics of Symbols and the Symbolization of 9/11

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Abstract

The responses to 9/11 are conferring symbolic meaning on the facts of 9/11. The transformation follows the general pattern of symbolic politics. In the process, Islam is implicated, by default, through three interconnected issues that are driving the discourse of 9/11: global security, the imperatives of modernity, and the reassessment of Islam. Islam is symbolized either in terms of a politics of confrontation or of cooptation. What is left out is the self-understanding of Islam. Contrary to the conventional opinion that Islam as a religion is not at issue, the very meaning of Islam is at stake in the politics of symbols.

The events of 9/11 can be nominally summarized as an act of terrorism by a handful of militant Muslims that killed slightly more than 3,000 people, destroyed two landmark buildings in New York City, damaged another one in Washington DC, and crashed a plane in rural Pennsylvania. The buildings destroyed, the lives taken, and the trauma inflicted are not merely material or psychological facts, but also symbolic and political facts. It was not simply buildings and lives that were attacked, but the symbols of power and politics.

In response, an unprecedented global mobilization against "terrorism" is taking place. In the context of international security, terrorists have acquired power by virtue of their networked structure, global mobility, and the potential of acquiring chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. The salience of this network is also based in its efforts to construct a parochial ideology of "Islam" as a contending political force around the world and, in particular, in the Middle East.

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The 9/11 tragedy stands as a symbol of not only these meanings, but also of a variety of contending and converging meanings that are affecting international politics, religious claims, perception of religion, civilizational identity, domestic policy, and military strategy: from the idea of a clash of civilizations rooted in historical differences to the need of a dialogue among civilizations based on mutual respect, and from the secular perception of the dangers of religion to the dangers posed to the integrity of religion. In effect, the symbolic meaning of 9/11 has acquired, in terms of global politics, the status of a marker that is increasingly connecting three critical issues: security, modernity, and the meaning of Islam.

Most of the contemporary reflections and imperatives for action surrounding 9/11 remain as matters of practical politics and military strategy. These range from ethnic profiling to deploying special forces, from labeling militant Islamists as misguided Muslims to reforming Muslim institutions, and from affecting a positive perception of western culture in Muslim societies to reforming popular Muslim attitudes toward the West and other religions. None of these are issues of theoretical inquiry,[1] but remain as legitimate issues of practical policy and politics. Yet, the post-9/11 world has also created the necessity for a theoretical inquiry on such substantive issues as the meaning of Islam and its expression in politics and cultural practices.

Serious questions are being raised about Islam, but they are not being pursued to acquire an understanding of their implications. For example, if Islam has been hijacked by terrorists, as is often stated, then the issue is terrorism, not Islam. In this context, any inquiry into Islam, whether theological or cultural, becomes redundant. Yet, Islam has become an issue, for, in both discourse and commentary, frequently and subtly, it is either blamed or exonerated. The reason for this, I propose, lies in the dynamics of symbolic politics that regulate the discourse of events and issues.

Relying on either practical or procedural reasoning alone tacitly closes off the inquiry. More importantly, it traps its users into taking sides on the practical imperatives of the day. For example, the “us” vs. “them” reasoning creates the imperative that for “Islam” to remain relevant, its tenets must conform to the secular policies of the West. Here, the politics of cooptation by the current agenda becomes salient for constructing the Muslim identity and the meaning of Islam. To avoid such false imperatives, one avenue of inquiry is to explore the issues surrounding 9/11 in terms of their symbolic meaning and the role that symbolic politics plays in constructing

them. This essay seeks to go beyond the nominal rendition of events to the underlying factors that are constructing the meaning of 9/11. Such factors include issues that acquire symbolic meanings that are subsequently reinforced by symbolic politics.

Symbolic Meaning and Symbolic Politics

Symbols[2] are the means by which meaning is constituted and conveyed.[3] Symbolic generalizations construct order by categorizing reality. Thus, "the West," "Islam," "Muslim," "terrorist," "fundamentalist," "freedom," and "America" are symbolic generalizations that order human collectives or their values. In academic discourse and political commentary, such symbolic generalizations have been – and continue to be – used in constructing the meaning of Islam, particularly, through various sorting schemes of classifying Muslim identity and politics.[4]

The Contingency of Symbolic Meaning

The purpose of symbols in political discourse is not simply to point but also to evoke, edify, and conserve meaning.[5] They do so by evoking categories of meaning that already exist in a culture and its history. For a symbol to be appropriated in a given discourse, the recipients must be familiar with it and interpret its meaning in terms that are favored by them.[6] Therefore, popular culture serves as a good barometer of what is going on. For example, many see 9/11 like a Tom Clancy novel, others see it like a blockbuster Hollywood movie, and President Bush has presented his case in the language of the "Wild West."

Symbolic meanings remain open-ended and stand in contrast to instrumental meanings.[7] Instrumental meanings are closed by virtue of being based on the knowledge of a cause-and-effect relationship – whether presumed or verified. In instrumental meaning, the problem lies not in a theory but rather in its deliverance (i.e., developing and putting in place an effective technology of intervention or a procedure). In its formal structure, procedural reasoning appears to be neutral toward the issues addressed. But in the realm of cultural meaning, such procedural reasoning cannot avoid relying on those symbols that are prevalent in a culture. Through this tacit reliance, procedural reasoning also becomes symbolic.

The political nature of such reasoning is often revealed in the regulative criterion used in meaning construction. One such criterion is the pres-

idential statement that "either you are with us or with the terrorists." In this statement, what defines "us" and the "terrorists" effectively sets the limit on the meaning of events. Contending sides rely on such criterion for the instrumental efficacy of setting limits. Nothing in the criterion justifies a moral claim, and yet it is precisely in making such a claim that the criterion is used. This is why procedural criteria typify the public reasons offered both by the West and the Islamists. In the backdrop of 9/11, the following are examples of procedural reason drawn from everyday news that create regulative meaning through the symbols embedded in the reasoning process:

- "The *cross* is a wagon that reminds us that as Christians, death is not the end, and death cannot defeat us. For the empty cross reminds us that Jesus did not remain dead in the grave. Instead, he rose from that grave to be our savior. And as Christians, we will rise, too."[8]
- "The thousands of people entombed in the wreck of the WTC were united in *martyrdom*."[9]
- "The service at Washington's National Cathedral on Friday was not a national funeral service for the fallen; it also consecrated the *crusade* to wipe out the people who would strike at our freedoms by thrusting knives in the backs of the innocents."[10]
- "*Israel* has acquired a symbolic value, an image of absolute Muslim impotence against the united powers of the *West*."[11]

What is notable in these forms of procedural reasoning is that, by substituting the symbols, al-Qaeda also provided the same reasoning to justify its actions: for example, the symbol of terrorists (those who strike terror in the hearts of the enemy) as *martyrs*, their role as a *savior*, their action as a *jihad*, and the *West* as a culture blinded by power and incapable to affect justice.

The particular permutations of symbolic meaning vary according to the historical milieu and in terms of the political context of their use. Let me engage you in an exercise to convey this point. I will first mention four statements without specifying their contexts:

- "In the month since that catastrophe, we Americans have regained our energy because we have a quality of life worth fighting for; it is worth fighting for our *freedoms*. While we continue to be alert and

sensitive to the new dangers threatening us, we need to stand as one to protect the freedoms this county has fought for in the past. One of our hard-fought freedoms is the right to collective bargaining to protect our livelihood and professional responsibilities. Another of these freedoms is our right to withdraw our services to influence the outcome of contract negotiation."[12]

- "Do not put the *calligraphy* on the living room wall. Visitors may suspect us of having terrorist connections."[13]
- "My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the *martyrs* to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated."[14]
- "Wherever you are, death will find you out. Even if you are in *towers* built up strong and high" and "[t]hat *day* some faces will be radiant, laughing, rejoicing. That day some faces will be dust-covered, (and) overcast with gloom. Those are the dissolute disbelievers."[15]

Each statement relies on symbols to express meaning. Three of the four statements are explicitly made in reference to 9/11. But, without specifying their context, it is impossible for the reader to sort out their source. One statement (no. 3) has nothing to do with 9/11; yet, from its tone, one can only hazard a guess as to its source. Let me now reveal the source and context of each statement.

The first statement is the opening paragraph of a memo issued on 30 October 2001 by a local chapter of the American Association of University Professors urging the university faculty to support a strike. Here, 9/11 is used to symbolize the moral imperative of collective bargaining as a struggle for freedom. The evocation of 9/11 is made to link the strike with the anti-terrorism campaign as a struggle between freedom and fear. The second statement is a casual comment made by a suburban Muslim housewife to her husband. Here, the symbolism is implicit in the meaning that an artifact confers on its display.

The third statement is made by Thomas Jefferson in a letter expressing his emphatic support for the French revolution. Here, the symbolism is the justification of rightful violence and the inconsequentiality of its effects. In this selection, victims are symbolized as the unintended martyrs to the cause of democracy. Although the statement has no contextual relevance to 9/11, it can also be read to justify the horrible events of 9/11, as some did in the Muslim world and the likes of Jerry Falwell did in the

West. The fourth statement is from the Qur'an (*Surat al-Nisa'*, 4:78 and *Surat `Abasa*, 80:38-42). In this context, the statements can be read as a prophecy of 9/11, as it is made out to appear by its non-Muslim user to symbolize Islam as violent and sadistic in its very core.

The point of this exercise is the following: The structure of symbols is such that they can be meaningful without the contextual specification of authorial intent. The author is whoever the user of the symbol is, and the context is whatever event the user wants to signify. The evocative power of the symbol overrides the descriptive accuracy of the propositions, and herein lies the strength and limitation of symbols. Symbolic meaning can be as much abused for the purposes of propaganda and mass mobilization as it can be used for expanding the horizon of meaning beyond the confines of nominal empiricism.

The Dynamics of Symbolic Politics

Political symbols, which are cultural forms of meaning, are also complex and contingent, for they emerge from and inhere in the interaction of the cultural mind, historical memory, and the ambivalence of public opinion.[16] Focusing on symbols allows one to understand how meaning is constituted, particularly in noting how an original event that gives rise to a symbol becomes less determinative with the responses that emerge in reaction to it. These responses beget other responses, and soon the original symbol acquires new and varied meanings.

Political symbols perform two important functions – they create expectations and preserve order.[17] To do both, they rely on a mix of historically preserved meanings and contemporary facts to structure the language of experiencing and expressing reality. The construction of the Muslim identity in the wake of 9/11 serves as a prime example, where a historical myth (medieval Europe's image of Islam) merged with a contemporary fact (the actions of a fringe group of Islamists). Symbolic meaning changes with the shift in context. For example, on 09/01/01, the U.S. Postal Service issued a limited set of Eid postage stamps to symbolize and recognize religious diversity in the United States. Yet, on 10/18/01, a news report opened with the following caption: "Muslim stamp – Tangled in politics: Symbol of inclusion a source of division." After 9/11, this symbol of inclusion thus quickly became a symbol of resentment.

To understand the dynamics of symbolic politics, symbolic meaning is one side of the coin. The other side is the instrumental meaning of actions.

The two meanings – symbolic and instrumental – interact in specific ways to define a situation and the political response to it. In politics, we thus have a mix of symbolic and instrumental meanings that remain embedded in rhetoric and rituals. Both moral rhetoric and public rituals are commonplace in international and domestic politics, as well as in the stark differences that exist between the two. For example, such moral rhetoric as the "axis of evil" and such public rituals as displaying the flag are carefully embedded in political speech to shape public understanding of events. Just as ancient rulers invoked the symbol of war gods to justify sacrifice and to mobilize, the same is also found in influential commentaries on 9/11.[18]

The dynamics of symbolic politics display four general features, as follows:[19]

- *Forming a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together for the ruling regimes to legitimize their power and interests.* This occurs both through the direct assertion of power and the construction of perceptions, motives, and directions in the ruled.[20] One example of such a formation is the argument that 9/11 is an exception to the rule of normal politics. This argument, in turn, shapes the politics of using all means to stop terrorism from becoming a precedent for global or local causes (i.e., a new normalcy).
- *Formulating a public problem, where the status of a phenomenon as a problem becomes a matter of conflict as interested parties struggle to define or prevent a definition according to which government is to act.*[21] Currently, such a process is underway in defining terrorism as a threat to global security. Governments that do not construe the problem as a global one (but consider it to be circumstantial) are considered to have delegitimized themselves. In diagnosing why 9/11 happened, one such problem formulation holds that there has been a breakdown of the state in Muslim societies due to their failure to modernize. This position, in turn, reinforces the meaning that the terrorism of 9/11 actually stands for state failure rather than religious fanaticism.
- *Attributing culpability for the problem.* Here, the government relies on the political, legal, and moral theories of culpability, and experts play a crucial role in providing the causal link. The end point of their analysis is to identify the adversary to be blamed.[22] In the post-9/11 world, such culpability is attributed not only to al-Qaeda and the

Taliban, but also to the Islamists and, implicitly, to Islam itself. While in public rhetoric Islam is acknowledged as a "noble" religion, nevertheless, in expert analysis it is often held to be wanting. The politics is then directed toward reforming Islam. This form of culpability is contested by the counter-claim that 9/11 is an affront to Islam. Here, the politics is to recover the "true" meaning of Islam from its misappropriation by militant Islamists.

- *Constructing policies to stabilize the problem and reassure the public*. This often requires the government to escalate and intensify its actions to assure the public that the problem is contained and that steady progress is being made.[23] In the post-9/11 world, despite public skepticism, the government frequently issues public warnings of threats without providing credible evidence. Military campaigns with catchy labels are routinely launched. It is also for providing such reassurance that the government tolerates the gaps between its espoused policies of civil rights and how they are actually implemented. The gaps are explained away as implementation difficulties, a lack of cooperation from the target public, or the exigencies of a situation. The practices of ethnic profiling of Muslims in the West and orthodox Muslims in their own societies reassure the public that potential adversaries are being contained. Since, in practice, profiling can also be discriminatory in intent, such a possibility, even when instances are documented, is routinely overlooked to safeguard the normative symbols of reassurance.

Emerging Issues in the Ongoing Symbolization of 9/11

ISSUE NO. 1: PURSUING GLOBAL SECURITY AND THE POLITICS OF ORDER. In simple terms, the understanding arising from 9/11 can be presented as follows: A handful of groups belonging to a global network have exploited the sentiments of frustrated Muslims and acted, through terror, to impose their narrow parochial views on others – Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In response, the leading issue that has emerged holds that terrorism, as a tactic to achieve political ends, is illegitimate under any "just war" doctrine[24] because it is against the religious ethos on which it bases its claims and is counter-productive to the aspirations that motivate such acts. It follows that since there can be no moral or political justification for terrorism, it should be opposed, crushed, and eliminated from political discourse, movement, and action. A concerted global effort, led by the United States,

is currently underway to pursue and sustain this agenda. It is premised not only on the self-interested notions of security but also on following "universal" and "moral norms" of political action.[25]

Almost all countries, irrespective of their national ideology, developmental stage, culture, and religious values, have officially supported this position. In fact, many have joined in force to pursue the vision. They are not simply acting under duress or as stooges created by the West.[26] In almost all countries, leading Muslim scholars and clerics have voiced their moral condemnation of terrorism and their political support for the vision of a world free of terrorism.[27] If this is the case, then, the issues related to 9/11 become primarily military, as they are currently conceived and pursued, and are supported by a variety of political, economic, and cultural strategies. As an analogy, it is like subduing a gang of bandits or a crime cartel and bringing its members to justice. Yet the issue of global security is not simply justifying practical solutions on moral grounds or only a matter of military action, political strategy, or cultural communication; more importantly, it is about conferring cultural and religious meaning upon events. Even the military and political strategies are dependent on how the latter issues are addressed.

Issue No. 2: Pursuing Global Modernity and the Politics of Progress. It is now almost a cliché that the post-9/11 world will be different, that the United States will become a different nation, and that a global solidarity based on decent political norms will emerge. In such a prognostic discourse, modernity occupies the central place in the currently predominant explanations. These explanations vary in terms of either justifying or criticizing the global hegemony of modernity spearheaded by the West, particularly by the United States.[28]

Modernity is implicated in various ways. One can attribute the very emergence of al-Qaeda and the Islamists to being a reaction to modernity, and their persistence and success to the very tools of modernity.[29] In addition, 9/11 can be marked as a watershed event pointing to a limit reached by Enlightenment-era modernity, for which Muslim opposition stands as a challenge to its expansion, as well as a challenge to the meaning of "postmodernity" as the natural heir to modernity. The fear of terrorism and the threat posed by premodern cultural formations rendered postmodern sensibilities marginal, and today, in the context of global political mobilization, even irrelevant.[30] The 9/11 tragedy also stands as a stark reminder of the insufficient modernization of Muslim societies. Here, the argument is

to intensify the hegemony of modernity by bringing about democratic changes in the political culture of Muslim societies.[31]

ISSUE NO. 3: REASSESSING ISLAM AND THE POLITICS OF COOPTATION, CONFRONTATION, OR DISTINCTION. In the post-9/11 world, "Islam" is implicated by default, despite the public denials of leading policymakers and opinion leaders. If Islam has been hijacked, as both Muslim and western leaders remind their audiences, then Islam as a religion is not at issue. Yet in most political and expert opinion, there is a creeping diagnosis of Islam as a defective or static religion.[32] Today, Muslims everywhere, at least in their perception, have become a suspect category, much like the way the Jews were in nineteenth-century Europe.

The current discourse on Muslim identity is fragmented along a continuum of cultural and political labels, each symbolizing a particular representation of Islam.[33] At one pole, the Islamists are identified as a worldwide military foe or as deviant Muslims. At the other pole, the Muslims are represented as a silent majority that is moderate and aspires for modernity. In between, there are other representations of Islam that remain eclipsed in the discourse on the polar extremes. I will discuss three such representations: secular, political, and symbolic.

All three representations are at play in relation to the symbolic politics of global security and the issues of modernity mentioned above. In which symbolization does the integrity of Muslim identity rest: in being coopted in the secular meaning, in being a means of confrontation under the political meaning, or in affirming the distinctive symbolism of the Qur'an? The choices are particularly crucial for the meaning of Islam in the current milieu. While al-Qaeda may eventually be contained or even destroyed, the meaning of Islam that will come out of the contemporary discourse may leave lasting marks on public consciousness and policy.

The Discourse on Religion in the Symbolization of Islam

In the wake of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, a concerned scholar perceptively wrote:

> Muslims sit passively as they are accused and exonerated; as they are constructed and reconstructed. ... Most Muslims do not appreciate or are not interested in the value of discourse. ... Consequently, Muslims are powerless to direct the discourse or to define the issues around which the discourse is to flow.[34]

It follows that Muslims can contribute their voice and vision to the politics of symbolization, particularly the symbolization of Islam, only by engaging the current discourse around 9/11.

In the aftermath of 9/11, what does Islam symbolize? Some hold "Islam to be the underlying cause of terrorism that goes back to the very founding period of Islam."[35] Others affirm Islam in terms of the Muslim communities' grievances. In all such symbolizations, what immediately comes to mind is "Islam" as a "religion." Let me clarify my reason of putting Islam and religion in quotation marks. This has to do with the very meaning of the word "religion" and its status in the discourse. What is tacitly legitimized in the prevalent discourse is a distinction between religion as personal faith and religion as a cultural tradition.[36] Thus, Islam as a religion becomes a subjective faith, and Islam as a cultural tradition is construed as a political ideology parading in the name of religion, and therefore, undermining its proper status in society and politics. In this formulation of religion, Islam finds acceptance only as a matter of personal faith, and its political or social expression is held to be outdated, parochial, and an inhibitor of modernity.

To say that Islam qualifies as a religion only as personal faith and as a segmented aspect of cultural practice not only contradicts the *self-understanding of Islam*, but, more profoundly, biases the meaning of the term "religion." Both positions, as definitional anchors in the meaning of religion, emerged with the advent of the European Enlightenment and were later reinforced by the social sciences, particularly anthropology, sociology, and psychology.[37] This meaning is now enshrined in the symbolism of the separation of church and state – a separation that is anchored in and regulated by modernity's constitutional, legal, educational, and cultural practices. In other words, the conventional meaning of religion in itself symbolizes a political ideology and culture, and hence is not – and cannot be – neutral toward other meanings of religion and their cultural and political expressions in practice.

Islam is not simply a matter of personal faith expressed as a personal speech or act or as upholding a cultural tradition. In the Qur'anic meaning, Islam is the path revealed by God for all human beings to follow. It does not constitute a separate dimension of behavior (e.g., economic, cultural, or political), but the direction of thought and action involving the totality of the life-world. However, the beginning point of entry onto the path is an act of faith. From this position, Islam stands neither as a private faith nor as a segmental aspect of a cultural tradition. Given this, it follows that what con-

stitutes the meaning of religion is the key to shaping and regulating one's understanding of Islam. The fact and fears of terrorism only dramatize the understanding, but do not constitute it. What follows is a discussion that maps the symbolization of Islam under three different approaches to the meaning of religion: secular, political, and symbolic.

The Secular Meaning of Religion and the Politics of Cooptation

In the secular approach, religion is a term of attribution, not of affirmation, made on the basis of the outward expression of patterned behavior that defines a community. This attribution claims neutrality and objectivity on the basis of the empirical approach taken to construe the patterns. But, this asserted nominal neutrality also hides a tacit fact in the very act of defining: the rejection of revelation as the founding source and meaning of religion, and hence the exclusive reliance on the behavior of social actors.

The secular approach privileges skepticism or atheism over enunciation or affirmation. In this approach, one makes such statements as: "Muslims say or Christians say this and that about God and reality." But what remains tacitly implied is that whatever they say is essentially false, because the claims are unprovable by the standards of proof privileged by secular consciousness. Thus, the meaning of "Muslim" or "Christian" is not what the agents hold them to mean, but rather what the secular attribution of the terms confer.[38] In advancing this tacit approach, it does not matter whether many of the key beliefs of the secularists remain unprovable, even by their own announced standard.[39] Such questions are rarely raised and, when they are, generally are not addressed.

The privileging of empirical facts as the regulative criterion of meaning is not primarily philosophical; rather, it is also political, as it is rooted in the evolution of a particular historical context.[40] In the "enlightenment" project, the secularists faced the political opposition of the Church. It therefore became a political necessity for them to dislodge the Church's theological basis from any claim to public reason. In effect, this meant incapacitating faith as a public reason in regulating the community's affairs and insulating it as a private affair of civic associations. In "protecting" religion, what secularization actually safeguards is not the contents of a faith, but the secular value of privacy.

In the context of Muslim cultures, secularization was sought by way of reforming Islam, as happened in the cases of western Christianity and other religions. The secularization theory holds that with modernization,

religion will recede from being a focal orientation of a culture and, at most, will remain as a treasured historical legacy. The movement of modernizing Islam envisioned by such reformers as Muhammad Abduh essentially interpret Islam on the basis of Enlightenment-era modernity.[41] In the secularization approach, the politics is to learn from the western experience in modernizing Islam. Thus, Turkey and Tunisia stand as exemplars of this politics of cooptation.

Another secularization thesis, which is less drastic, is based on an evolutionary theory of religion's meaning. Here, its meaning is construed in terms of leaving behind parochial and traditional religious identities and transcending them so that one can embrace a global civil religion based on universal human rights and global regime norms.[42] In Muslim cultures, except for a small cosmopolitan elite who maintains a nominal association with Islam for the sake of maintaining cultural legitimacy, the meaning of Islam as a civil religion remains only as a matter of prognosis.[43]

Despite decades of efforts to secularize Islam, to render it into a civil religion or to practice it only as a cultural tradition, all attempts to dislodge or transform its originary or revelatory meaning have failed. Rather, these efforts have mostly served to sustain the ruling regimes in power. On the contrary, despite the flaws, it is rather the resilience of a majority of Muslims who retain Islam at the symbolic center of their identity that stands as the frequently cited fact when refuting the secularization thesis.[44]

The Political Meaning of Religion and the Politics of Confrontation

If the price of modernization is the cooptation of religion into the secular agenda, or for its functional efficacy in symbolic politics, then what other avenues are available to sustain and affirm one's religious identity? When answering this question, the political meaning of religion comes to the fore. In the political meaning, the approach of affirming identity is confrontational: either polemical or political.

In the polemical approach, the focus lies in making advantageous comparisons between the claims of one religious identity in order to undermine the claims of another. Here, the best claims of one's identity are contrasted with the worst examples of the opposing identity. In both the Muslim images of Christianity and the Christian images of Islam, the polemical approach has a long legacy and remains embedded in their respective cultural discourse.[45] The same approach underlies the clash of civilization thesis that now enjoys popularity both in the West and among

the Islamists. Here, the best of the West is contrasted with the worst of Muslim culture, or vice versa. This strategy of constructing contradictions, in effect, serves the symbolic politics of agenda formation. For example, secularization is resisted in Muslim cultures on the claim of reproducing the worst features of the West, and in the West, Islam is generally held as a stumbling block to progress.

With 9/11, the politics of polemical confrontation became sublimated in the strategy of military conflict. In this context, a variety of identity constructions have come to sustain symbolic politics, particularly in attributing causality and blame, as well as to highlight the scope of the security threat. Thus Islam, in the political meaning of religion, has come to symbolize militant or radical Islam, or simply the Islamists' creed.[46] In Muslim cultures, the Islamists, who enjoy very little material support from the public and are often silenced by their governments, have also come to symbolize Muslim resistance to western powers and the claim of western injustice toward the Muslim world.

The Symbolic Meaning of Religion and the Politics of Distinction

To understand what Islam means as a "religion," one first has to accord to Islam its self-understanding and then, on the basis of this self-understanding, offer critical observations. By using the term "the self-understanding of Islam," I am not referring to what Muslims construe "religion" to mean, or to what Islam is supposed to be, or to what they in fact do while claiming to follow Islam. Rather, Islam is what the Qur'an means it to be, because the Qur'an is the foundation of all claims to Islam and of being a Muslim. Hence, the meaning of "Islam" as well as "Muslim" need to be understood in terms of their distinctive symbolization in the Qur'an, not in terms of the warrants of proof that underlie religion's secular meaning or the warrants of power that underlie the political meaning. By making this distinction, I am not referring to any claim of exclusivity, superiority, or uniqueness. Rather, this simply refers to a positive affirmation of difference, just as liberal democracy is not exclusionary in its meaning but is distinctive as a political theory and practice.

The Qur'an consistently maintains its symbolic approach to distinctive meaning, even when pointing to factual referents. Thus, animal sacrifice stands as a symbol of devotion to God, as do prayer and charity.[47] Focusing on the rites of sacrifice, prayer, and charity is not what constitutes Islam; rather, they stand as factual referents of the individual's dis-

play of devotion to God. The distinction between the symbol and its referents, which is central in the Qur'an, is obscured in the secular and political meaning of religion.

Let me offer an understanding of how symbols function in conveying the distinctive meaning of religion in the Qur'an. On hearing that God has revealed to Prophet Muhammad a new set of guidance as to what the divine is and how to relate to it, many members of the Makkan elite, rather than simply raising doubts, challenged the claim. While the Qur'an depicts their doubt in the affirmative (and, in formal character, their claims are no different from what contemporary secularists raise), it refuses to acknowledge their challenge. The Makkans raised two objections: First, they wanted to know why they should break off from what is accepted or tacit in their cultural tradition (especially given their cultural milieu, in which tradition provided the same legitimacy that progress provides today), and second, they asked for demonstrable proof to validate the Prophet's claims.[48]

It is important to reiterate that the Qur'an did not invalidate the Makkan's doubts, but rather pointed to their challenge as irrelevant for their affirmation. For example, the Qur'an mentioned that both Abraham and Moses also entertained doubt, for which they sought proof from God – proof that God gave to both. In both cases, the proof was symbolic, where the nominal facts stood for the symbol of God's presence.[49] Yet, in the case of the Makkan demand, we find that God instructs Muhammad not to acknowledge their doubts as valid reasons for their objections, let alone give them any proof – direct or indirect.[50] But when the charge against the Qur'an shifted from doubting God to accusing Muhammad of being a poet or of being inspired by some other poets, only then, in his defense, did the Qur'an forward a symbolic form of demonstrable proof: It counter-challenged the doubters to produce verses similar to its own.[51]

Underlying the events just mentioned are subtle contextual differences that are central to the symbolic meaning of nominal facts. While on one occasion the Qur'an grants indirect corroboration, on another it refuses such corroboration. The difference lies not at the level of factual corroboration, but in the very recesses of the human disposition: Abraham and Moses demanded facts on the basis of a disposition to accept God and seek His help in overcoming the limits of human cognition. The Makkans, however, based their demand on a disposition of defiance and rejection. According to my understanding, this critical difference in disposition is why the Qur'an refused to respond to the Makkan demand. In other words, God refuses to privilege any particular means as the basis of the human

affirmation of the divine.[52] The Qur'an leaves this affirmation entirely to the human freedom of choice in responding to the dispositions of each individual soul.[53]

The distinction maintained by the Qur'an is based on a distinctive meaning of being human and a specific demand on human practice. The Qur'an holds that faith is a disposition of the human "soul" toward affirming the divine.[54] The exercise of the disposition lies in either denying or affirming the sovereignty of the divine.[55] Dispositional affirmation finds valid expression not in confession but in critical practices. For example, it is not valor in war that expresses faith, but the warriors' fiduciary conduct – despite the outcome of the war. Thus, both terrorism and many other aspects of human practices fail to meet this criterion of faith. The Qur'an defines religion as the self's free submission to God and its expression in virtuous conduct in the life-world.[56] In the context of all the revelations sent to humanity throughout history, the Qur'an designates religions as distinctive paths to the divine.[57] In this context, Islam is one such path chosen for the emergence of a universal faith community known as Muslim.[58]

While Islam symbolizes the submission of all creatures to their divine Creator, who is One, and the agents who do the submitting as Muslim, Islam also symbolizes the culmination of a historical path of such submitters in distinctive faith communities – the final one also called Muslim. Thus, Islam as religion and Muslims as individuals of faith have a dual meaning in the Qur'an – a duality that connects the inclusive scope of the Qur'anic meaning with their historical specifications or distinctions. Such dimensionality of meaning is made possible because of the symbolic nature of meaning in the Qur'an. For Muslims, then, the meaning of religion cannot be bracketed off as a subjective faith or defined as a cultural tradition – commonly referred to as "popular" or "cultural" Islam.

The Qur'an also holds that those who do not adhere to this meaning of religion are rejecters, ignorant (symbolized as blind), or hypocrites. Referring to this distinctive meaning of religion, Muzammil Siddiqi, during the national prayer service held shortly after 9/11, cited the Qur'anic admonition: "Those who lay the plots of evil, for them is a terrible penalty; and the plotting of such will not abide."[59] Yet Charles Krauthammer misunderstood the verse's meaning, as seen by his asking whether Siddiqi implied the plotters to be the United States. Without taking into account what the Qur'an refers to as Islam, such misunderstandings (e.g., equating the Qur'an's meaning with popular Muslim sentiments) – intentional or not – will continue to put Islam on trial.

Conclusion

In the wake of 9/11, many Muslim communities in the United States sought to portray their commonness with the secular West, rather than use the occasion to highlight their distinctiveness, particularly in regards to the meaning of religion. Here, cooptation functions by way of suppressing distinctiveness for the sake of ensuring solidarity against a common enemy. Such cooptation, although subtle and often inadvertent, is essential to legitimizing the meanings of symbolic politics, especially as a means of public reassurance. Thus, we see that the politics of symbols joining force with the more enduring politics of the conventional meaning of religion. It is symbolic politics that, after 9/11, has placed the meaning of Islam under scrutiny.

The meanings of Islam that are being considered in this scrutiny are linked to three critical issues that are regulating the symbolic politics of 9/11. Among the three issues, the imperative of modernity is affecting the meaning of Islam the most, for it is subordinating the Qur'an's symbolic meaning to the secular and political meaning of religion. Such representations of Islam are occurring not out of malice, but because of their functional value in supporting the politics of global security and reforming traditional Islam.

In focusing on the symbolic approach to the meaning of religion (i.e., the Qur'an's inclusive meaning of Islam and Muslim), I have tried to portray the sense in which Islam as a religion is different from what the term now commonly invokes. In this approach, the meaning of religion resides in maintaining the distinctive claims of divine revelations in the context of an inclusive human community, where each community is made responsible for following its own path. By exemplifying the Muslim identity in the inclusive community of religious diversity, Islam construes its meaning as a religion. With its distinctive meaning of religion and the affirmation of such meaning in politics, Islam offers itself as a guide, rather than a source of problems. Therefore, relying on the Qur'an to symbolize Islam is a task that the politics of 9/11 has conferred upon the Muslims. How they respond will shape the politics of symbols that will affect them in the future.

Notes

1. A theoretical inquiry is different from a practical one, in that the purpose here is to clarify and tentatively explain events rather than to gain control over them. Such clarification and explanation is sought by postulating the

underlying causality of events or framing analogical models for clarification. In contrast, having confidence in solving problems and assuring that a particular course of action is the most effective are the features of inquiry in practical policy actions.

2. Symbols can be any object, act, event, quality, or relation that conveys meaning. Symbols vary from one realm of experience to another. For example, mathematical symbols are precise, aesthetic symbols are poetic, and social and political symbols are affective.
3. For symbols as the means of constituting and conveying meaning, see Joseph Gusfield, *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking and Driving and the Symbolic Order* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 16-17. In this context, Gusfield notes on page 21 that symbolic meanings are the "modes by which public consciousness is itself constructed and defined."
4. For the variety of classificatory schemes to specify the Muslim identity, see R. Hrair Dekmejian, "Multiple Faces of Islam," in *Islam in a Changing World*, eds. Anders Jerichow and Jorgen Simonsen (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1997), 1-12. Also see Leif Manger, ed., *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in Global Contexts* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1999).
5. The purpose of symbolic meaning is not only to represent but also to evoke. See Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971), 6-10, 165, 166, 174, 177, and 180. Montgomery Watt terms this as the "iconic" or secondary meaning. See his *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 81.
6. Symbols must be intimately familiar to a culture in order to be appropriated in a discourse. Such familiarity could be in the form of myths or popular perceptions. See Edelman, *Politics*, 14 and Gusfield, *Culture*, 10.
7. Symbolic meaning stands in contrast to instrumental meaning, particularly in being open-ended regarding the possibilities of meaning. In this sense, theoretical inquiry generally seeks and conveys symbolic meaning, whether in the form of explanatory or interpretive inquiry. Gusfield summarizes the distinction in the following terms: "Symbolic meaning focuses on how meaning is constituted, not how behavior is influenced." See Gusfield, *Culture*, 18. For an earlier elaboration of the complex and contingent character of symbolic meaning, see Edelman, *Politics*, 1-3, 6, and 178.
8. Rev. Robert E. Wilson in the news report "How Could God Allow This to Happen," 20 Sept. 2001, p. GZ06. Online at: www.washingtonpost.com.
9. Norman Lockman, "United in Tears, Then Justice: We're in this Together," Cincinnati Enquirer, 18 Sept. 2001.
10. Muzzammil Siddiqui, Sept. 14 National Prayer Service at the National Cathedral.

11. Karen Armstrong in an interview with Karen Fragala, *Newsweek*, 11 Jan. 2001. Along the same lines, see Cal Thomas' column, "Lessons from Israel," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 28 Sept. 2001.
12. Letter to the faculty from the chair of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Job Action Committee and the President of the AAUP, 30 Sept. 2001.
13. Personal knowledge.
14. Thomas Jefferson, "Letter of January 3, 1793." Quoted in Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Quill, 1987), 34.
15. Quoted in Adam Parfray (ed.), *Extreme Islam: Anti-American Propaganda of Muslim Fundamentalism* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), ix.
16. Political symbols arise from the complex interactions between the cultural mind, historical meaning, and public opinion. See Edelman, *Politics*, 4-5. Also see Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).
17. On how political symbols create expectations and preserve order, see Edelman, *Politics*, 2 and 7.
18. As a current example, Charles Krauthammer writes: "[W]hat the secular West fails to understand is that in fighting religious fanaticism the issue – for the fanatic – is not grievance but ascendancy. What must be decided is not who is right and wrong – one can never appease the grievances of the religious fanatic – but whose God is greater. After Afghanistan there can be no doubt. In the land of jihad, the fall of the Taliban and the flight of al-Qaeda are testimony to *the god that failed*" (my emphasis). "Only in Their Dreams," *Time*, 24 Dec. 2001, 61.
19. For the four features of symbolic politics, see, Gusfield, *Culture*, 9-22 and Edelman, *Politics*, 810.
20. Drawing on the works of Gramsci 1971, and Bauman 1976, Gusfield depicts the process as hegemonic – "the way in which ruling groups create legitimation and functional response to their power and interests." Gusfield, *Culture*, 187.
21. For the use of symbols in the politics of affecting perception and propaganda, see Edelman, *Politics*, 4, 7, and 165.
22. For the formulation of causal attribution in creating an adversary to blame, see ibid., 10. A widely available macro-example of such attribution is Samuel Huntington's clash of civilization thesis.
23. For the use of symbolic politics (as ritual and drama) in sustaining authority and its use in reassuring the public, see Gusfield, *Culture*, 18-22, and Edelman, *Politics*, 168, 172, and 183.
24. See John L. Esposito, "Jihad and the Struggle for Islam," in *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Also see Amir Taheri, *Holy Terror: Inside the World of Islamic Terrorism*

(Bethesda, MD: Adler and Adler, 1987), 9-11. Taheri writes on page 11: "Islam is not limited to what the Partisans of Allah believe or do. In other words, Khomeini's teaching are Islamic, but Islam is not limited to what Khomeini teaches."

25. See Condoleezza Rice's speech on "Terrorism and Foreign Policy," given to the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 29 Oct. 2002. Online at: www.whitehouse.qov/news/release/2002/04.
26. There has been – and continues to be – a worldwide condemnation of terrorism by Muslims, from the ulama to public leaders. For example, the Grand Shaikh of Al-Azhar mosque, Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, stated that "it is the right of the country that has been attacked to retaliate, but it shouldn't kill innocent people." Quoted in Peter Ford's "Listening for Islam's Silent Majority," *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 Nov. 2001.
27. The vision of a world free of terrorism, whether group-based or state-based, is shared by Muslims from all walks of life. See Peter Ford, Ibid. Also see Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Where Was God on September 11?" 27 Nov. 2001. Online at: www.arches. uga.edu-godlas/sachedina.html.
28. See, John M. Owen IV, "Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 26, no. 3 (2001/02). Owen notes that extending liberalism means extending American power. This is because, he writes on page 151: "The argument that the United States is a benign hegemon is one that only a liberal could make. Liberal elites everywhere belong to a transnational group whose members identify with one another's success." In a similar vein, Condoleezza Rice holds that American unipolarity is not imperial or territorial, and therefore, the old categories do not apply in the context of the present threat. See Rice, "Terrorism and Foreign Policy."
29. See Donald M. Snow, *September 11, 2001: The New Face of War?* (New York: Longman, 2002). Also see Yonah Alexander and Michael Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network* (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 2001).
30. See A. Sivanandan, "The Challenge of September 11," in *Beyond September 11: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Phil Scranton (London, Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 122. Also see, Roger Rosenblatt, "Back into the Fray of History," *Time* (21 Nov. 2001), 106.
31. See Rice, "Terrorism and Foreign Policy," for benign hegemony and the need to democratize Muslim political cultures. Also see Esposito's "Where Do We Go From Here" as well as Bassam Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (Palgrave: New York, 2001). Such an agenda does not take into account the capacity of the states as viable change agents. In particular, the modernization agenda fails to address the problems of state jurisdiction that were forcibly created by the colonial rulers – jurisdictions that in many cases do not overlap with either the people's cultural ethos or religious iden-

tity. Also see G. H. Jensen, *Militant Islam* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), chapter 3, for how the colonial powers incapacitated Muslim political institutions; and Mark Huband, *Warrior of the Prophet: The Struggle for Islam* (New York: Perseus Books, 1999), and Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Both Huband and Roy hold that, today, militants and radicals are prominent because they reflect the social upheaval of their failing political systems and not the tenets of the faith.

32. See Watt, *Islamic Fundamentalism* and Tibi, *Islam.* This position is often implicit in the Muslim call for *ijtihad.* For a strong critique of Muslim political cultures, see Aziz Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993).
33. Muslim identity today is fragmented in a continuum of labels. Thus, the representation of Islam also varies from the anthropocentric perspective. See Lief Manger, *Muslim Diversity* and Dekmejian, "Multiple Faces."
34. Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, *Conference of the Books: The Search for Beauty in Islam* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: University Press of America, 2001), 79.
35. See the role of the Kharijites in early Islam. Esposito, *Unholy War*, 72; Taheri, *Holy Terror*, 42; and John Kelsay, *Islam and War* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1993), 84-85.
36. This is the prevalent distinction in the discourse on religion – between religion as personal faith and the inculcation or expression of a cultural tradition.
37. See Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as a Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). The anthropocentric position is radically articulated as self-expression and self-realization, both in the concept of "invisible religion" (Thomas Luckmann) and syncretic spiritualism (Robert Wuthnow).
38. The secular meaning of religion is pervasive even in those writings that empathize with the Muslims. For example, Edward Said, in his *Covering Islam* (New York: Random House, 1981), writes on page xix: "I do not believe as strongly and as firmly in the notion of 'Islam' as many experts, policy-makers, and general intellectuals do; on the contrary, I often think it has been more of a hindrance than a help in understanding what moves people and societies."
39. See John Keane, "The Limits of Secularism," in *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, eds. John L. Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, (New York: New York University Press, 2000). Keane points out that the democratic ideal of secularism can and does function as a dogma. He writes on page 29: "Suspicion of secularism is warranted by the fact that most contemporary secularists unthinkingly sacralise secularism." For the elaboration of this view, see in the same book the article by Abdelwahab Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanence and Deconstruction" and Ahmet Davutoglu,

"Philosophical and Institutional Dimensions of Secularisation: A Comparative Analysis."

40. For the denial of political authority to the Church or the ulama as the motive of secularization, see note 46 for references. For the philosophical critique of secularism, see Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).
41. The position of such early reformers as Mohammad Abduh and Syed Ahmed Khan, who framed the conception of modernity as an implementation of Islamic principles, has been criticized quite strongly by later observers. These views are now held to be responsible for entrenching in politics the idea of restoring a glorious past. An entirely different view is forwarded by Arkoun, who writes on page 173:

> The critique of Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Marxist, Liberal, etc. reason will take the form of an effort to identify the unthought and unthinkable, not with reference to a modernity which is conceptually one with the recurrent aspirations of European Western hegemony, but by making the epistemological resolution to move towards an intellectual outlook based on the principles of overcoming, surpassing, and removing all constructions, all affirmations of identity, all truths deriving from or spread by violence.

Mohammed Arkoun, "Islam, Europe and West – Meanings-at-Stake and the Will-to-Power," in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, eds. John Cooper, Ronald Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000).

42. Robert Bellah and Phillip Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980). Also, Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
43. In many Muslim cultures, the idea of a civil religion also finds expression in the call of returning to authenticity. In this approach, the meaning of religion thus becomes coopted in the politics of authenticity.
44. The secularization thesis holds that modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. Modernization is postulated as the vanguard of this process. In this context, Berger notes that secularization on the societal level is not linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness. Peter Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," in *Islam and Secularism*, eds. John Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, 39.
45. In both Christian and Muslim discourse, the polemical approach dates from the tenth century. In *Covering Islam*, Said characterizes this tradition as playing "word politics," drawing on the concept of Frank and Weisband. In word politics, writes Said, "each side sets up situations, justifies actions, forecloses options, and presses alternatives on the other" (xvi).

46. For the complex identifier of Islamists, see Oliver Roy, "The Concept of Islamism" and "The Sociology of Islamism," in *The Failure of Political Islam*, chapters 2 and 3.
47. Qur'an 22:37.
48. See Qur'an 8:31: "When Our communication are recited to them, they say: 'We have heard, indeed; if we pleased we could say the like of if; this is nothing but the stories of the ancients." At one point the Makkans demanded that if Muhammad were speaking the truth, then as proof he needs to bring to life their dead forefathers (Qur'an 37:15). Also see Qur'an 17:88, 90-93, and 25:4-8, 21, and 32.
49. The Qur'an points out that it carries its own evidence (29:47-51). It states: "Certainly We have explained for men in this Qur'an every kind of similitude, but most men do not consent but deny" (17:89). For the provision of indirect proof to overcome doubt or reinforce faith, the Qur'an points out that signs were given to Prophets Abraham (2:258, 260) and Moses (6: 35 and 7:160). Also see Qur'an 15:1, 25:33, 26:2, 27:1, 28:2, 36:69-70, and 43:2.
50. Addressing the Prophet and therefore the Muslims, the Qur'an states: "Upon you is only the responsibility of delivering the message, while calling to account is Our responsibility" Qur'an 3:20, 13:40, and 16:82.
51. "If you are in doubt as to that which We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a chapter like it and call on your witnesses besides Allah, if you are truthful." See also Qur'an 2:23, 10:38, and 11:13.
52. The refusal to privilege a particular form of affirming the divine is generally conveyed in the idea of not creating any associates of God and through unconditional submission. Thus the Qur'an states that "No vision can grasp Him" (6:103) and then "Say, the truth is from God, so let him to whom it pleases, accept, and let him to whom it does not reject" (18:29).
53. The Qur'an leaves the affirmation of faith entirely to each individual's freedom of choice. This freedom is not cognitive, but dispositional. The Qur'an points to the dispositional state of faith in the following terms: "We have heard Your message and accept it. We seek Your support, and know that our movement is toward You" (2:285).
54. "Turn directly towards religion, for God has crated the human being's dispositions in accordance with it" (Qur'an 30:29). The Qur'an clarifies this "turning toward" by stating: "Say: We do not believe, but say, we submit; for faith has not yet entered into your hearts." The Qur'an characterizes the internalization of faith as its affirmation in conduct (5:41, 61). Wilfred Cantwell Smith highlights the strict distinction between faith and belief as a unique feature of Islam. See his *Faith and Belief: The Difference between Them* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1998).
55. "O people! Indeed there has come to you the Truth from your God, therefore, whoever accepts, he does so for the good of his own soul, and whoever

rejects, he does so to the detriment of his soul, and God is not a custodian over you" (Qur'an 10:108). The characteristic of those who accept is clarified in Qur'an 49:15 as "those who struggle hard with their wealth and their lives in the way of God."

56. See notes 54 and 55. Also see Colin Turner, *Islam without Allah* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 2000). The classical work on the critical meaning of iman and Islam is that of Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1966).
57. For the support of the idea that religions are paths to the divine, the Qur'an states: "Every nation shall be called to its Book (i.e., guidance) and in terms of their conduct (i.e., in what thy did in response to the guidance)" (45:28-29). The Qur'an also forbids disputing about religion other than in fair ways (23:53, 29:46, and 30:32).
58. The parameters of the Muslim community are ethical, not sociological. Therefore, the community is normative, not historical. Thus, the Qur'an states that the Muslims are a people who act justly (30:29), are upright, understand the signs of God, and cultivate piety in their hearts (22:31-32). The Qur'an further comments: "They think that they lay you under an obligation by becoming Muslims. Say: Lay me not under obligation by your Islam; rather, God lays you under an obligation by guiding you to the faith if you are truthful" (49:17).
59. See Muzammil Siddiqi, "Voices of Moral Obtuseness," *The Washington Post*, 20 Sept. 2002.