

## Have We All Been Hijacked?

The biographer of Muhammad and expert on fundamentalism says Sept. 11 is a watershed moment for all the Abrahamic faiths

By Karen Armstrong

There has been much talk of the Islamic religion itself having been "hijacked" by the terrorists. The appalling crime against humanity violated the cardinal principles of Islam and has taken it off in quite the wrong direction. Certainly, this action seemed to endorse the mistaken view so common in the West that Islam is essentially a fanatical and violent faith.

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But is this really a case of a faith being hijacked? Not yet. Because in this case, the other people in the "plane"--as it were--can take an effective stand against the moral nihilism of the terrorists. Muslims can decide whether they are going to follow the hijackers into violence and hatred, away from the true teachings of Islam, or ensure that their faith is not driven off-course.

You'll recall that the primary meaning of the word jihad is not "holy war" but "struggle" or "effort." This is a very important religious principle. It reminds us that religion is never something achieved or finished. The revelation is given, but those who follow it have to make a constant effort, day by day, year after year, to put it into practice in a flawed and tragic world.

Each faith tradition represents a constant dialogue between a timeless, transcendent, or sacred reality and the constantly changing circumstances of life here on earth. We all have to struggle to make our scriptures and the insights of our tradition speak to the circumstances we find ourselves in.

These circumstances are always unique. The Sept. 11th events gave Muslims a terrible insight into the way their faith can be abused and made an instrument of evil. Now they must initiate a new jihad, a new effort to delve creatively into their rich faith traditions and emphasize as never before the compassion, justice, and tolerance that are central to the Qur'anic vision.

President Bush has pointed out that the terrorists' crime has "blasphemed Allah." And all over the world, Muslim leaders and scholars have also condemned the atrocity. But verbal declarations are not what religion is primarily about. The struggle, or jihad, must continue every day in the coming months, in practical ways. Every time a violent action or an intolerant word is spoken, the world

becomes a worse place and the virus of hatred and evil spreads. But every time any single believer reaches out to others in compassion and sympathy, the world improved infinitesimally. That daily, hourly effort is the jihad required right now.

Muslims don't carry this responsibility alone. Jews and Christians belong to the same religious family; they too can use this trauma creatively to reaffirm the values that we all hold in common. The religions of Abraham all worship the same God; all three have a deep commitment to compassion, justice, and peace.

We haven't always realized this. Christians have persecuted Jews relentlessly; they have led Crusades against Muslims. For centuries, Jews and Muslims lived together in peace in the Middle East, but for nearly 100 years, they too have been locked in a terrible conflict, leading

them to revile each other's religious traditions. This must stop. We have just had a terrible revelation about where such hatred can lead.

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Religion, like any other human activity, can be abused. And the particular temptation of monotheism, with its personalized conception of the divine, has been to assume that God is a being like ourselves writ large, with likes and dislikes similar to our own. The Crusaders went into battle to slaughter Muslims with the cry "God wills it!" I am pretty sure that the hijackers went to their deaths with much the same cry on their lips on Sept. 11th.

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But obviously "God" wills nothing of the sort. What the Crusaders and the terrorists were doing was projecting their own hatred onto a Being they had created in their own image and likeness. God can all too easily be made to give a sacred seal of absolute approval to our most loathsome prejudices and policies. And now monotheists must be more careful of falling into this idolatry than ever before.

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Far from being addicted to warfare, Islam insists on the importance of peace. The message of the Qur'an is a plural vision; it respects and values other traditions. When the Prophet Muhammad told the Muslim community that in the future they must pray facing Mecca (instead of Jerusalem, the Muslims' first orientation), he was trying to return to the time of Abraham, when, he imagined, believers didn't consider themselves Jews or Christians, did not argue about theological issues (such as the divinity of Christ) that nobody could prove one way or the other. They did not claim that *their* tradition had the monopoly on truth, or that other ways of being religious were inferior, but were united in their faith.

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In the early days of his mission, Muhammad seems to have assumed that Jews and Christians belonged to the same religion: After all, they all worshipped the same God. When, later, he found that in fact they

had serious theological disagreements, he was shocked. It seemed perverse and wrong to him that people who surrendered their entire lives to God should quarrel with one another about abstruse theological matters—it was God that mattered, not how people interpreted their experience of the divine.

It was not that Muhammad thought that everybody should belong to one giant world religion. The Qur'anic view is that God has sent prophets to every people on the face of the earth, who speak His word to them in their own language and their own cultural traditions. The Qur'an was a scripture in Arabic for the Arabs, though anybody of any race was welcome to join his faith community. Muhammad never expected Jews or Christians to convert to Islam unless they specifically wished to do so, because they had received perfectly valid revelations of their own. But he did think that they should stress the things that united them, instead of exalting their own tradition at the expense of other faiths.

When he arrived in Medina, he was bitterly disappointed when the Jews living there didn't accept him as a prophet. This challenged his vision, but some Jews of Medina were friendly to the Muslims. They told them a very interesting local tradition about Abraham that delighted Muhammad, because it proved that the Arabs had not been left out of the divine plan, as they thought, but had been included from the very beginning.

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The friendly Jews told him that Abraham had had two sons: Isaac, through whom the Jews trace their lineage, and Ismail, who was the father of the Arab peoples. The book of Genesis told how Abraham had been forced to cast Ismail and his mother Hagar out of his household, but that God had promised Hagar that Ismail would also be the father of a great people, just like Isaac. In later years, went the

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local belief, Abraham had visited Ismail in the wilderness of Arabia and together they had built the Kabah, the ancient cube-shaped shrine in the heart of Mecca, the holiest site in Arabia and the first temple there to the One God.

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Two years after his arrival in Medina, Muhammad was inspired by God to rule that Muslims must face Mecca and the Kabah when they prayed. This reflected his wish to go back to the spirit represented by Abraham, who had lived before the arrival of the Torah and the Gospel, and thus before the faith had been divided into hostile groups. Abraham, says the Qur'an, had simply been a *hanif*, a man of pure faith. Muslims were to remember this when they prayed facing the house that Abraham had built: They were now turning toward God himself and not toward any established religion.

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"Verily, as for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects—thou has nothing to do with them. Leave them to God, and in time He will make them understand what they were doing.

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Say: 'Behold, my Sustainer has guided me onto a straight way through an ever true faith—the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was no idolater.

Say ' Behold, my prayer, and all my acts of worship, and my living and my dying are for God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds."  
—Qur'an, 6:159 –162

This did not mean, of course, that the Qur'an denied the revelations of the later prophets—quite the contrary. The Qur'an insists Moses, Jesus, and all the great prophets sent to humanity confirmed one another's insights. But it does mean that religion and revelation should bring us together and must not separate us into warring camps.

We need to cultivate this "Abrahamic" spirit during these terrible days. All of us, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, have used our religion to denigrate and even to persecute others. But Abraham is our common father, and if we can use this horror to realize that we must not exalt our own faith at the expense of others', perhaps something good can come out of evil.

If the atrocity is used by Christians and Jews to ostracize all Muslims and to denounce their faith as inherently evil, then it would not simply be Islam that was in danger of being hijacked on Sept. 11th, but Judaism and Christianity too.

Karen Armstrong is the author of 'The Battle for God,' 'A Brief History of Islam' and the best-selling 'A History of God.'