Two Islamic Soldiers

By Damon Lynch, October 2001

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Religion was the compelling moral force that propelled planes into buildings on September 11, 2001. To understand why the carnage took place, some level of understanding of this moral force is essential. For those who are religious, and who do not support the overwhelming use of violence, this moral force can be written off as a mutant strain of religion, blatantly wrong, and quite different from their own understanding. For those who are skeptical of religion, or hostile to it, this moral force can be viewed as yet another indicator of the irrational and perhaps dangerous basis of religion, not to speak of its capacity to rouse people to commit atrocious acts with the moral insulation of alleged divine justification. For instance, Richard Dawkins opined, "To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns." (Guardian, Sept. 15).

Interestingly, both perspectives prioritize this moral force as some other peoples' force, who are unsurprisingly seen as dangerous and possibly quite mad. Someone else's ignorance, someone else's craziness, is in focus. While convenient, this approach is not useful. For the religious, it does not encourage reflection on how commonly held religious understanding may well be implicated too, including beliefs they themselves may hold dear. For the skeptical or hostile, it becomes all too easy to write off religion and even those who are religious as one of the primary problems, at the expense of missing significant efforts that contribute to genuine, constructive peace building.

Both perspectives are inadequate if we are to take peace, and quite likely our survival, seriously. Instead, genuine critical inquiry into the nature of this moral force is a vital step if we are going to collectively learn from September 11, and help prevent such tragedies in future.

A look at how movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan have used religion when clamoring for socio-economic and political change is an interesting place in which to start, beyond the obvious reason that the alleged perpetrators of the carnage hold base there. It is also an area where Western powers have had a major impact, through

formal colonization and subsequent political, economic and military interventions. Its people have a vigorous sense of Muslim identity.

While we could focus attention on the Taliban, who emerged in the mid 1990's, with their extreme interpretation of Islam based on Saudi Arabia's official state religion Wahhabism, for a number of reasons it is more useful to turn to earlier movements. For a start, the Taliban were nurtured and fully backed by the Pakistani government. The Taliban violently seized power in a war-ravaged country rendered susceptible to state-sponsored totalitarianism. In Pakistan itself, meanwhile, such extreme religious interpretations are popular for only a minority of the population. The Pakistani government used the Taliban to further its own economic and political goals in Afghanistan—certainly not for any concern of Islamic purity. While studying the Taliban is useful to see how extreme fanatics can use religion, it is arguably more useful to understand how more mainstream interpretations allow extremists to emerge using religion to justify their fanaticism.

Instead of focusing on the Taliban, we can turn to a couple of earlier movements in Afghanistan in Pakistan that explicitly drew upon religion. The first is the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union, which contributed decisively to the conditions that led to the Taliban's emergence. The second, a remarkable nonviolent Muslim movement against British colonial rule in the northwest of Pakistan, is strikingly different. In this article, we will take a look at the lives of two individuals who led these movements—General Akhtar Abdur Rahman Shaheed, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan—for some perhaps surprising lessons. Both men were distinguished soldiers, and are little known outside the region.

The Silent Soldier

General Akhtar, 1924-1988, lead the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union and associated Afghan communist regime. He was Director-General of the ISI, Pakistan's equivalent of the CIA, from 1979-1987. Unlike the CIA, the ISI is responsible for domestic as well as international spying and covert operations, with its leadership consequently feared by many, including much of Pakistan's military. Given the length of Akhtar's tenure, and the power of the position, he was a central figure in military dictator President Zia-ul-Haq's administration.

Of East Punjabi descent, Akhtar joined the military in 1946 as a young man, and after the partition of India, and subsequent creation of Pakistan, was to fight in three wars against India. Introspective in nature, Akhtar preferred anonymity to being in the public eye (unlike some of his military colleagues), and was referred to by colleagues as the silent soldier.

Drawing upon his extensive military experience and knowledge of tribal culture and methods of fighting, Akhtar planned and directed the Afghan Jihad, supported by American, Saudi and to a lesser extent, Chinese funds. Akhtar worked closely to carry out the Jihad with CIA head William Casey in an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation. Casey apparently shared with the Afghan Mujahideen leaders a deep respect for Akhtar's military cunning and demanding personal leadership. Akhtar would often tell the Mujahideen leaders, "Kabul must burn." Some 70% of American funds for the Mujahideen went to Islamic extremists, again not for reasons of religious purity, but because of the extremists' wartime effectiveness. Ultimately,

Akhtar was the only military leader since World War II to take the Soviet Union on in the battlefield and inflict vast and telling losses.

Akhtar explicitly acknowledged to Zia-ul-Haq while planning the Afghan Jihad that it would be seen as having a compelling moral force. Indications are that he not only viewed this as a useful propaganda weapon, but that he faithfully believed it himself, for he drew upon his Muslim faith and identity throughout his military career. India's partition influenced this when he was almost killed by Hindus while on duty because he was Muslim, being saved only by the arrival of fellow Muslims. According to a Brigadier who worked particularly closely with him during the Afghan Jihad, the massacres of Muslims by Hindus and Sikhs during partition was "never forgotten and never forgiven," and for the rest of his life, "he regarded India as an implacable enemy, both of his country and his religion." A fellow military officer, recalling an incident in the 1970's, remarked "One evening we were out together in a forward locality, and from my vantage point we could clearly see a big town in Indian held Kashmir. He stood there and stared at the town for a long time. The lights in the houses were coming on one by one. He ground his teeth and said, 'if only once I get the orders you will see what I do.' He walked around like a caged lion ... his own eyes reflected the intense feeling he felt for the pain and suffering of his fellow Muslims over there." Akhtar's great ambition, said the Brigadier, was "that after the Soviet defeat he would be able to visit Kabul and offer prayers to Allah for freeing the city from His enemies."

The Nonviolent Soldier of Islam

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, 1890-1988 (Akhtar died the same year), was a nonviolent soldier who fought for freedom and justice for more than 70 years. Incredibly, he raised a large nonviolent Muslim army to fight British colonial rule from the midst of a proud and largely tribal people, the Pathans (also referred to as Pashtoons or Pakhtoons), who had a renowned history of fighting using handmade guns, daggers, and at times outrageous cunning. This army, called the Khudai Khidmitgars ("Servants of God"), remained resolutely nonviolent in the face of severe repression and humiliation from British colonial rulers. The British violence was of similar savagery and intensity to that which the Taliban has dished out in the last few years, except it lasted for many decades. There were no pretensions of "civilized" warfare for the British: in the words of one of their 1930 reports, "The brutes must be ruled brutally and by brutes." The British regarded the area, the North West Frontier Province, as being of great strategic significance, as it was the gateway to India, and they wanted their crown jewel colony to remain under their control. The last thing they wanted to see were organized, unified Pathans. The Pathans, meanwhile, had a burning desire for freedom. So the British cut down the Khudai Khidmitgars with ruthless violence, and tried to sow dissension among the Pathans through divide and rule, using their usual methods of bribery and coercion.

Khan's achievements in leading the Khudai Khidmitgars are not easy to overstate. It was astonishing not only that they could remain nonviolent in the face of such horror, but also that they should do so to begin with, given their warlike way of life and easy access to weapons. As British violence like mass shootings, property destruction, and torture (including genital torture) was inflicted, the Khudai Khidmitgars' numbers increased, swelling to around 100,000. Jawaharlal Nehru, who later became India's first prime minister, was stunned by the Khudai Khidmitgars' nonviolence, and found

it incredible that "the man who loved his gun better than his child or brother, who valued life cheaply and cared nothing for death, who avenged the slightest insult with the thrust of a dagger, had suddenly become the bravest and most enduring of India's soldiers."

One striking characteristic of Khan throughout his lifetime was his dogged determination to represent the truth, even at great personal expense. As an old man, flying in the face of official propaganda he declared the war in Kashmir was not a Jihad but a façade, hardly endearing himself to the many thousands of Pakistani families who lost their sons in the war. As a young man, when looking for opportunities to serve his people, he began by opening schools and organizing people socially. He was arrested, and brought before a deputy commissioner who wanted to know why officials had allowed him to return to the country after he had gone on pilgrimage to Afghanistan. Khan replied, "First you take our country from us and now you won't even let us live in it?" For this, he was imprisoned three years at hard labor. He was to endure a total of 15 years in British prisons before partition, and a further 15 years in Pakistani prisons after partition, more than one-third of his adult life (and more than Nelson Mandela).

Khan took on not only British imperialism, but looked with a critical eye at his own society, and encouraged reforms. He rallied against the privilege and power of the big landlords and worked to dismantle the local caste system, saying ordinary, working people such as craftsmen should be able to own land. He was almost killed by resentful landlords for doing so. He directly confronted religious ignorance, like the belief that children who attended school would go to hell. He wanted to see women play their rightful role in society, instead of being crushed by the burden of tradition and neglect.

The Khudai Khidmitgars were formed from a largely illiterate society, so in addition to publishing a journal, the Pakhtun, in the early years Khan spread his message of sacrifice, work and forgiveness by personally visiting 500 Pathan villages. While his people may not have been educated, they could recognize selfless action when they saw it. Khan valued selfless service to others as a foundation of religious action. He wrote, with the authority of his life's example, "Religion is also a movement. If selfless, undemanding and holy men and women join this movement and dedicate themselves to the service of their country and the people, this movement is bound to be successful. Such people will be a blessing to mankind. Through their contribution their country and their people will flourish and prosper."

Most of all, Khan directly challenged the role of revenge in society. The culture of the Pathans was tribal, and as Eqbal Ahmad points out, "The tribal code of ethics consists of two words: loyalty and revenge. You are my friend. You keep your word. I am loyal to you. You break your word, I go on my path of revenge." Pathans were long adherents to taking revenge to uphold honor, being somewhat notorious for engaging in bitter family and tribal feuds that could last generations. Khan directly appealed for his people to forgo revenge, and adopt nonviolence. It was an explicit precondition of

joining his army. In a society where not to take revenge, and therefore lose one's honor, was considered worse than death, this was a stunning achievement.

Lessons for the Present

What lessons can we learn from the lives of General Akhtar and Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the movements they were associated with if we are to take peace seriously? That is, what do their respective approaches to resolving conflicts and achieving justice tell us about how we can move forward in the present situation?

Combating Communalism

The first, and most obvious lesson to be learned is that when religion is viewed as being communal, it can be rapidly be turned into a highly destructive force. "Crowd psychology is a blind force," wisely remarked renowned Indian literary figure Rabindranath Tagore. "Like steam and other physical forces, it can be utilized for creating a tremendous amount of power. And therefore rulers of men, who out of greed and fear, are bent upon turning their peoples into machines of power, try to train this crowd psychology for their special purposes. They hold it to be their duty to foster in the popular mind universal panic, unreasoning pride in their own race, and hatred of others."

While the same communal forces that almost killed Akhtar at the time of India's partition were overwhelming much of Northern India, the Khudai Khidmitgars patrolled their communities protecting people who belonged to minority religions, saving many lives.

Communalism builds on the belief that one religion is superior to another, or the belief that religious truths are mutually exclusive between religions. These beliefs are in fact the official doctrinal positions of many religious institutions, all of which claim to be speaking with divine authority. For many believers, they are a common sense truth about their beliefs. Khan specifically opposed such brazen foolishness. He proclaimed, "My religion is truth, love, and service to God and humanity." It was his "firm belief" that all religions are based on the same truth, and should be given equal respect. He remained a devout Muslim while eager to learn from other religions. Regarding those who promote communalism—of which he saw a great deal in his life, and the vast suffering it inflicted—he commented "those who are indifferent to the welfare of their fellowmen, those whose hearts are empty of love, those who do not know the meaning of brotherhood, those who harbor hatred and resentment in their hearts, they do not know the meaning of Religion."

The fact is, beliefs of religious superiority are a prime target for extremists to expropriate and twist into their terrible logic. If instead religious believers held a common notion that beneath the surface, all religions teach much the same—naturally with differences reflecting temperament, culture and time—then it would be nonsensical for extremists to claim that alleged divine wrath is on their side. Only fools would take them seriously.

Rejecting Revenge

As we have already noted, Akhtar was unable to forgive Hindus and Sikhs when they massacred Muslims (just as many Hindus and Sikhs were unable to forgive Muslims

when they were likewise massacred). Instead he worked to strengthen institutions that depend fundamentally upon revenge, just as the U.S. and British governments are currently doing. The leaders of the Taliban do the same themselves.

Much of the time the U.S. and British governments hide their vengeful focus behind language like "retaliatory strikes," or "bring the perpetrators to justice," and so forth, but revenge is essentially their focus. Ditto for the Taliban. The three are determined to convince respective recipients of their propaganda that this path is the only effective way forward to provide security and make up for the death of their people, irrespective of their falsehood.

It is wise, however, to learn from the experts on revenge before confidently asserting this to be true and proceeding to kill people. The Pathans are experts on revenge. They practiced it fearlessly for hundreds of years, against outsiders and amongst themselves. They celebrated it in their poetry, sang of it in their songs. Presumably all cultures are familiar with husbands taking revenge against adulterous wives and their lovers by killing them, but how many have tales of women rallying their menfolk to take revenge long after the men have been exhausted by it? The huge numbers of Pathans who joined the Khudai Khidmitgars did not give up revenge simply because they admired their leader. They did so because they appreciated the grueling cost of revenge to their society, how it tore apart their families and tribes, and in the context of outside domination, made them susceptible to divide and rule. The Khudai Khidmitgars renounced revenge not from a position of weakness, but one of strength and courage. They held strongly to this belief in the face of severe humiliation and destruction. As outsiders, we can choose to learn from them, and apply the universal insights they worked with to our own lives, or we can ignore them and inflict the consequences upon others and ourselves.

What are these universal insights? Revenge occurs when those who hold onto their hate, and have the ability to channel it into action, do so. Hatred and resentment prosper where there is no forgiveness. To seek protection from violent revenge, a person, family or country can try to suppress it through further violence, or work to create conditions for forgiveness. Essentially, there is no alternative to these two. The consequences of further violence are often quite certain: more violence. As Gandhi once famously remarked, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

These insights have already been demonstrated in Afghanistan since September 11. As soon as retaliatory violence in Afghanistan was initiated, bin Laden's followers immediately threatened further violence in return. The U.S. and its allies will try to crush them, but as many observers have tirelessly pointed out, a terrorist operation is extremely difficult to crush, and the violent response is an ideal recruiting drive for more terrorists. Terrorism in fact, thrives on revenge.

A counterargument to all of this, of course, is that the bin Laden's of this world are so extreme, that their view of their religion or ethnicity is so deranged, that only war will keep decent people of the world safe from such rogues. This is where it becomes vital to remember the forces that created bin Laden to begin with. Pakistani and U.S. intelligence services masterminded the war in Afghanistan, the same war bin Laden was recruited for and sharpened his teeth in. It is not important whether bin Laden received training directly from American, British or Pakistani officials (he certainly interacted with them), but what is important to acknowledge is that the type of resistance towards the Soviets aggressively promoted by the U.S., British and

Pakistan governments was not the only choice. Yes, the Soviet invasion was a brutal one, but no more brutal than that of the British in the region not so long before. As the Khudai Khidmitgars proved, war was not the only possible response: a more protracted, nonviolent resistance could have saved a lot more lives on both sides, and done much to improve the future development of Afghanistan.

Of course, institutions like the CIA and ISI do not include nonviolent soldiers among their soldiers of choice. This is not a reflection of the effectiveness of nonviolence. Rather, it is merely another indication of the danger of the narrow mindset that is nurtured by such institutions, and if these institutions cannot change their approach, a call for their replacement.

Spiritual Struggle

Rational, detached arguments against the follies of war and revenge are all very well, some claim. But people are profoundly angry, they point out: enraged in the United States, and enraged in the Middle East. Their anger is justified, so the argument goes (a point claimed by all sides in the conflict). Justice must be done.

Now, remarkable as it may seem to some people, religion actually has something rather useful to say about this (Richard Dawkins, are you listening?). It is perhaps most eloquently expressed by Gandhi: "I have learnt through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power which can move the world."

The struggle to contain and transform anger is an inner struggle. Through the centuries, inner struggles like this have been the specialized domain of the spiritual dimension of religion. It is worthwhile spending a little time pondering this, for in this matter, religion itself is confusing and contradictory.

We can start by taking another look at Khan's statement about those who do not know the meaning of religion. By Khan's reckoning, people like Akhtar are religious only in the sense they identify themselves as belonging to a religion, and perhaps carry out its rituals and customs, and believe in its dogmas. But they have failed to undertake the arduous task of transforming natural feelings of fear and anger, and the desire to retaliate, into positive forces that genuinely contribute to life, rather than take away from it. In short, they identify as religious, but are not spiritual.

When Khan was talking of people whose hearts are empty of love, he was signifying something more than an intellectual or rational struggle. These are absolutely necessary, of course. However, he was talking of a demanding spiritual struggle, of taming forces that can overwhelm us with their intensity: burning anger, seething resentment, and jealous hatred, just to name a few.

"It is my inmost conviction that Islam is amal, yakeen, muhabat [work, faith, and love] and without these the name Muslim is sounding brass and tinkling cymbal," Khan said. He would have fully agreed with the Buddha's statement, "Hatred can never put an end to hatred. Love alone can."

To talk of love in a time of war may seem preposterous and hopelessly idealistic, but this is what Khan and others like him did during their lives, and they were on the front lines. They did this not as part of a post-war reconciliation process, but in the thick of devastating conflict. They went through tremendous suffering fighting tyranny, and

despite this they never clamored for revenge. Instead, they called on us to undertake a war within the mind, so that our highest aspirations will be better reflected in our daily realities.

Spirituality itself is nothing other than the interplay between humanity's very highest aspirations and the demands of daily living. With it is an awareness of a dialogue that takes place deep within our minds, urging us to make wise choices, based not on often-tempting short-term satisfaction, but lasting goodness. To be spiritual is to reflect these aspirations in one's thought and actions, very often an arduous and sometimes thrilling undertaking. Spiritual people engage in this noble duty with a sense of purpose; often failing, they pick themselves up after their inevitable mistakes, and encourage others to do the same by their own example.

Spirituality is why Gandhi said to a world focused primarily on the external, "turn the searchlight inwards."

Reforming and Revolutionizing Religion

Religion is the social manifestation of spirituality, the attempt to take the lessons of spiritual traditions and give them institutional status. People are not equal in their spiritual inclinations. We learn from others by example. Spiritual truths, by their very nature, are difficult to communicate. When spirituality is institutionalized into a system of religious thought, and when structures are erected to promote that thought, the very essence of that thought is often lost. Lessons are codified into rules, experiential discoveries transformed into hardened declarations of fact, and questioning and innovation is replaced by a mass of customs and institutions.

Religion may have spirituality for its heart, but all too often creeds and dogmas have been its clenched fist. Throughout history religion has been used to fervently justify staggering levels of violence and social decay. It may often seem that religion is doomed to perpetual failure, trafficking mystery posed as unchallengeable fact, rationalizing authoritarianism, and at best acting as a battered ambulance for the wounded and distressed.

Perhaps Tagore had this in mind when he continued his discussion on crowd psychology by saying, "Therefore I do not put my faith in any new institution, but in the individuals all over the world who think clearly, feel nobly, and act rightly, thus becoming the channels of moral truth. Our moral ideas do not work with chisels and hammers. Like trees, they spread their roots in the soil and their branches in the sky, without consulting any architect for their plans."

For religious believers, Tagore's observations, however accurate they might be, are not an excuse to give up the fight to make their religious institutions relevant to contemporary needs. Without significant structural reform and changes of focus, religious institutions will continue, by and large, to pose a threat to genuine peace. Their spiritual basis must be manifested in their institutional outlook. Religious institutions should be participatory, where members and formal representatives are partners in exploring their inner and outer worlds together—all interested parties right there on the edge, participating and learning from one another. The great ambassador of the unity of religions, Swami Vivekananda, made the point powerfully: "[Y]ou must remember that freedom is the first condition of growth. What you do not make free, will never grow. The idea that you can make others grow and help their growth, that you can direct and guide them, always retaining for yourself the freedom of the

teacher, is nonsense, a dangerous lie which has retarded the growth of millions and millions of human beings in this world. Let men have the light of liberty. That is the only condition of growth."

For skeptics of religion, the Khudai Khidmitgars are not evidence justifying religion. They can point out, truthfully, that just as religious believers hold fast to wildly diverse opinions on violence and nonviolence, so do the nonreligious. They can argue that religion is not necessary to practice nonviolence. Yet skeptics must acknowledge that religion was not some kind of optional attachment for potent nonviolent movements like the Khudai Khidmitgars; it was integral. When religion identifies, names and connects forces within the mind and society that contribute to peace and justice, it can be an empowering moral force. Skeptics as well as believers can learn from the universal spiritual insights these nonviolent movements and their religions have to offer, even as they discard the rituals, ceremonials, dogmas and creeds.

The Task Ahead

Abdul Ghaffar Khan is not a respected name for many Pakistanis outside of his home province. The level of hatred and contempt for Khan among elder generations, who heard little but sensationalized propaganda about him from despotic rulers, is significant. To an outsider, it may seem surprising that a man and an entire movement who fought bravely and truthfully could be so successfully demonized. However, this kind of aggressive ignorance towards good people who profoundly challenge society is not found only in Pakistan. "Fear not the path of truth for the lack of people walking on it," advises a traditional Arabic saying. These are fighting words, appreciated by anyone who engages in the struggle to make our world a more peaceful place in which to live.

Stakes at the moment are high indeed. Millions of Afghans are on the brink of starvation, and many are surely dying, an entirely avoidable tragedy. Pakistan has nuclear weapons, and while its current leadership is not extreme, it is not inconceivable that extremists could seize power, and decide that they ought to give Americans a dose of their own nuclear medicine. Likewise, there are sure to be many in the Islamic world who fear the use of nuclear weapons by either side.

"The present-day world can only survive the mass production of nuclear weapons through nonviolence," Khan said not long before his death. "The world needs Gandhi's message of love and peace more today than it ever did before, if it does not want to wipe out civilization and humanity itself from the earth's surface."

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