

This issue of *Pravada* focuses on the aftermath of the September 11 attack on New York and Washington DC by suspected Islamic radicals. Among the analysts are leading philosophers, thinkers and writers from Asia and elsewhere.

THERE ARE MANY ISLAMIS

Edward Said

Spectacular horror of the sort that struck New York (and to a lesser degree Washington) has ushered in a new world of unseen, unknown assailants, terror missions without political message, senseless destruction.

For the residents of this wounded city, the consternation, fear, and sustained sense of outrage and shock will certainly continue for a long time, as will the genuine sorrow and affliction that so much carnage has so cruelly imposed on so many.

New Yorkers have been fortunate that Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a normally rebarbative and unpleasantly combative, even retrograde figure, has rapidly attained Churchillian status. Calmly, unsentimentally, and with extraordinary compassion, he has marshalled the city's heroic police, fire and emergency services to admirable effect and, alas, with huge loss of life. Giuliani's was the first voice of caution against panic and jingoistic attacks on the city's large Arab and Muslim communities, the first to express the commonsense of anguish, the first to press everyone to try to resume life after the shattering blows.

Would that that were all. The national television reporting has of course brought the horror of those dreadful winged juggernauts into every household, unremittingly, insistently, not always edifyingly. Most commentary has stressed, indeed magnified, the expected and the predictable in what most Americans feel: terrible loss, anger, outrage, a sense of violated vulnerability, a desire for vengeance and unrestrained retribution. Beyond formulaic expressions of grief and patriotism, every politician and accredited pundit or expert has dutifully repeated how we shall not be defeated, not be deterred, not stop until terrorism is exterminated. This is a war against terrorism, everyone says, but where, on what fronts, for what concrete ends? No answers are provided, except the vague suggestion that the Middle East and Islam are what 'we' are up against, and that terrorism must be destroyed.

What is most depressing, however, is how little time is spent trying to understand America's role in the world, and its direct involvement in the complex reality beyond the two coasts that have for so long kept the rest of the world extremely distant and virtually out of the

average American's mind. You'd think that 'America' was a sleeping giant rather than a superpower almost constantly at war, or in some sort of conflict, all over the Islamic domains. Osama bin Laden's name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination. Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured at home for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict, without clear borders, or visible actors. Manichaeic symbols and apocalyptic scenarios are bandied about with future consequences and rhetorical restraint thrown to the winds.

Rational understanding of the situation is what is needed now, not more drum-beating. George Bush and his team clearly want the latter, not the former. Yet to most people in the Islamic and Arab worlds the official US is synonymous with arrogant power, known for its sanctimoniously munificent support not only of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes, and its inattentiveness even to the possibility of dialogue with secular movements and people who have real grievances. Anti-Americanism in this context is not based on a hatred of modernity or technology-envy: it is based on a narrative of concrete interventions, specific depredations and, in the cases of the Iraqi people's suffering under US-imposed sanctions and US support for the 34-year-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Israel is now cynically exploiting the American catastrophe by intensifying its military occupation and oppression of the Palestinians.

Political rhetoric in the US has overridden these things by flinging about words like 'terrorism' and 'freedom' whereas, of course, such large abstractions have mostly hidden sordid material interests, the influence of the oil, defence and Zionist lobbies now consolidating their hold on the entire Middle East, and an age-old religious hostility to (and ignorance of) 'Islam' that takes new forms every day.

Intellectual responsibility, however, requires a still more critical sense of the actuality. There has been terror of course, and nearly every struggling modern movement at some stage has relied on terror. This was as true of Mandela's ANC as it was of all the others, Zionism included. And yet bombing defenceless civilians with F-16s and helicopter gunships has the same structure and effect as more conventional nationalist terror.

What is bad about all terror is when it is attached to religious and political abstractions and reductive myths that keep veering away from history and sense. This is where the secular consciousness has to try to make itself felt, whether in the US or in the Middle East. No cause, no God, no abstract idea can justify the mass slaughter of innocents, most particularly when only a small group of people are in charge of such actions and feel themselves to represent the cause without having a real mandate to do so.

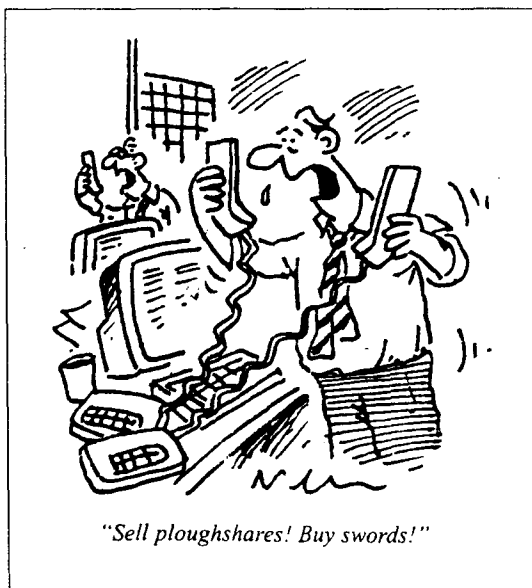
Besides, much as it has been quarrelled over by Muslims, there isn't a single Islam: there are Islams, just as there are Americas. This diversity is true of all traditions, religions or nations even though some of their adherents have futilely tried to draw boundaries around themselves and pin their creeds down neatly. Yet history is far more complex and contradictory than to be represented by demagogues who are much less representative than either their followers or opponents claim. The trouble with religious or moral fundamentalists is that today their primitive ideas of revolution and resistance, including a willingness to kill and be killed, seem all too easily attached to technological sophistication and what appear to be gratifying acts of horrifying retaliation. The New York and Washington suicide bombers seem to have been middle-class, educated men, not poor refugees. Instead of getting

a wise leadership that stresses education, mass mobilisation and patient organisation in the service of a cause, the poor and the desperate are often conned into the magical thinking and quick bloody solutions that such appalling models provide, wrapped in lying religious claptrap.

On the other hand, immense military and economic power are no guarantee of wisdom or moral vision. Sceptical and humane voices have been largely unheard in the present crisis, as 'America' girds itself for a long war to be fought somewhere out there, along with allies who have been pressed into service on very uncertain grounds and for imprecise ends. We need to step back from the imaginary thresholds that separate people from each other and re-examine the labels, reconsider the limited resources available, decide to share our fates with each other as cultures mostly have done, despite the bellicose cries and creeds.

'Islam' and 'the West' are simply inadequate as banners to follow blindly. Some will run behind them, but for future generations to condemn themselves to prolonged war and suffering without so much as a critical pause, without looking at interdependent histories of injustice and oppression, without trying for common emancipation and mutual enlightenment seems far more wilful than necessary. Demonization of the Other is not a sufficient basis for any kind of decent politics, certainly not now when the roots of terror in injustice can be addressed, and the terrorists isolated, deterred or put out of business. It takes patience and education, but is more worth the investment than still greater levels of large-scale violence and suffering.

Prof. Edward Said teaches at Columbia University, New York. Among his books are *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, *Covering Islam*, and *Peace and its Discontents*.



He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. *They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.* Nation will not take up sword against nation. Nor will they train for war any more.

Isiah Chapter 2 verse 4