



Muslims in prayer at Richmond mosque: There are several kinds of jihads, and none of them mean war

BILL KEAY/Vancouver Sun

What's in a word? Plenty

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for Saturday Review

Jihad. Say this word in the West, and you're likely to conjure up images of crazed terrorists brandishing Kalashnikovs.

But this racist stereotype is as far removed from the word's meaning as the Christian crusades – a nightmare of rape and pillage inflicted upon those living in the Holy Land (Muslims, Jews and Christians alike) by Christian Europeans – were from the Christian concept of brotherly love.

Jihad means struggle, not war. And strictly speaking, the emphasis is much more on the inner struggle than on the outer.

But still, in the West, the association of jihad with violence persists, due as much to misinformed media as to the thuggery of certain militant groups who use Islam to further their political ambitions.

Writing recently about Benjamin Barber's book *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Vancouver Sun columnist Stan Persky called the atrocities of Afghanistan's Taliban movement an example of jihad in the name of Mohammed.

That is as erroneous as linking the actions of militant Christian pro-lifers who bomb abortion clinics with the teachings of Christ.

Furthermore, Persky states, as so many other journalists have, that "jihad" is the Islamic term for "holy war." And he quotes Barber, saying that "jihad pursues a bloody politics of identity."

While writers and journalists are not necessarily supposed to transcend the confines of their culture – in this case one that has tragically feared, despised and misunderstood Islam for over a thousand years – standard media stereotypes of Islam have an impact on the lives of the tens of thousands of Muslims who live in British Columbia. Once again they must endure having their religion bashed by people who know very little about it.

The meaning of jihad exists on more than one level," says Hanna Kassis, professor of Islamic and Arabic studies at UBC.

The primary meaning of the word is *al-jihad al-akbar* or the greater jihad, which consists of "an internal, individual struggle to rid oneself of the forces of evil within that try to swerve a person away from obedience to God." Kassis cautions that this is the more difficult of the jihads because "you cannot always identify the enemy, the enemy is always within oneself."

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The *al-jihad al-asghar*, the lesser jihad Kassis says, is "the struggle by all members of a community against those who threaten to destroy the religious life of the community." According to Kassis, this struggle is always a defensive one.

"One cannot assume," says Kassis, "that someone is an enemy. It must be ascertained that there is a real threat to the faith."

For example, the Bosnian resistance to Serbian ethnic cleansing is a legitimate jihad. Saddam Hussein's call for a "jihad" against the allies during the Gulf War is not, because the threat was not against Islam but against a regime.

Kassis feels that, where the term jihad is used, the onus is on the West to "understand what is being said" and to "interpret texts honestly."

A classic example of this would be the response to Yasser Arafat's address to the Muslim community in Cape Town in 1994 during which he spoke of jihad. While many Western journalists took this to mean a declaration of war against Israel, most Arabic-speaking commentators understood this as the struggle of the Palestinian people to achieve statehood.

B.C. Muslim Association president Usman Ali takes this one step further and says that "the real jihad is for people to respect and accept each other's cultural differences."

It is much harder, he maintains, to come to an agreement with someone than to fight it out with them on the battlefield – "not just in the Middle East, but here too."

The real test of someone's character, he says, is the *jihad al-nafs*, (literally the jihad of the self) which involves self-control and ultimately "sacrificing part of yourself – giving up part of your ego" in order to achieve peace with your neighbor.

On a practical, daily level, Ali cites mutual acceptance and understanding between, say, South Asian Muslims in Richmond and their non-Muslim neighbors – a kind of multicultural jihad if you will – as such an example.

Ali laments media distortion of Islam as an intol-

er-ant and violent religion, and points instead to its traditions of peace and tolerance. He tells the story of the Prophet Mohammed's trip to Taif, where he was stoned by those with whom he had come to make peace. "The angel Gabriel appeared to him," explains Ali, "and said 'if you want us to destroy them we will.'" But the Prophet declined, saying "no, in the future they will understand my message of peace."

And after the famous battle of Badr (the first major battle against the polytheists), Mohammed told his followers that "We are coming from the smaller fight to the bigger one. Now we must fight our own egos."

In fact, the popular image of Mohammed as a warrior is not accurate, Ali says. The Prophet and his followers were initially pacifist, and only decided to attack their persecutors after repeated offences against the umma or Muslim community. Their jihad was one of defence.

Local imam, Bosnian Ziad Delic, whose experience of intolerance has been rather first-hand, is disturbed by what he perceives as "widespread ignorance" about Islam here.

Although Vancouver has fortunately been spared such ugly incidents as the vandalizing of a Colorado mosque last April, or the beating and arrest of a Chicago imam by police last March, Delic still worries about the subtler kinds of prejudice that Muslims encounter here.

He hopes that through dialogue, mutual understanding can be fostered. But in the end, he says, "If people would like true knowledge about Islamic terms, they must go to the right source."

Perhaps the real struggle, then, is the one to cut through the centuries of historical conflict and misunderstanding between Islam and the West.

At a time when so much conflict does exist in the world between groups that don't accept or understand each other, astute commentary should always distinguish between fascism and the real intent of the religions that it so often hides behind.

And at a time when Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world and the third-largest in Canada, awareness of and respect for Muslim tradition would seem important – or at the very least appear practical.

Language can be a powerful weapon or a tool of enlightenment. Even a single word – like jihad – can have many meanings. ◊