

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I hear those who are attacking our troops and trying to sabotage our efforts in Iraq called “Jihadis” and also “Wahhabis.” Jihadis, I think I understand: people who see themselves as conducting a jihad (holy war) against us. But what does Wahhabi mean?

Osama bin Ladin’s Al-Qaida (and the Taliban in Afghanistan) subscribe to a very strict, puritanical form of Islam that goes back to Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-87). He was a religious scholar who made an alliance with the Arabian sheik Muhammad ibn Saud whereby whatever territory Ibn Saud conquered, he would be the military leader, but Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab would be the religious leader. After having great military success, but then being crushed by the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, the Saud family (still allied with Wahhabi Islam) reestablished its rule of Arabia in the early 20th century. Hence today’s Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabiya is still the government-supported form of Islam. People like

Osama bin Ladin, however, think the Saudi royal family has betrayed true Wahhabiya and become too moderate. They want to topple the Saudi family and restore what they consider real Wahhabiya.

Perhaps the best short-hand way to explain Wahhabiya is to compare it to the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition in Christianity. As the Calvinist Puritans wanted to “purify” the Church of England of everything unbiblical (that there was no warrant for in Scripture) and that had developed since New Testament times, so the Wahhabis see themselves as purifying Islam of all innovation. Therefore all developments in theology, law or practice are to be rejected.

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s

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main concern, however, was to root out idolatry (Arabic shirk, literally “associating” anything that is not God with God) and thereby defend the unity and uniqueness (Tauheed) of God. Much as Calvinists and other Protestants see the veneration and invoking of saints as idolatry (the worship of something beside God), Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab considered the widespread veneration of Sufi holy men and visiting their tombs (where prayers were made to them and gifts left) to be idolatry. Looking to any spiritual source besides God (and therefore any prayers to “saints” and all forms of magic) was shirk (the one unforgivable sin in Islam), and the person guilty of it was not a true believer in God, not a

true Muslim, and was therefore deserving of death. This meant that all Sufi Muslims and all Shi’a Muslims were not really Muslims because they honored human beings (the Sufi saints and the Shi’a Imams and religious scholars) too much. (In 1803, Wahhabi forces captured the city of Kerbala in Iraq and massacred all of its inhabitants for being Shi’a.). In effect, Wahhabis believe that all Muslims who are not Wahhabis are guilty of shirk and not true Muslims.

We have had such strict purists in Christianity (the Puritans, for example). But wherever “the quest for purity” arises, it is a “greedy ideology,” as claimed by van Velzen and van Beek in “Purity: A Greedy Ideology” in *The Quest for Purity: Dynamics of Puritan Movements*.

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