

The Lure of Jihadism, or 'Boys Will Be Boys'

by Raymond Ibrahim
Pajamas Media
February 3, 2010

<http://www.meforum.org/2585/lure-of-jihadism>

Print Send RSS Share: Digg del.icio.us Facebook

According to a recent ABC report, “As many as three dozen criminals who converted to Islam in American prisons have moved to Yemen where they could pose a ‘significant threat’ to attack the U.S., according to a report on al-Qaeda from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. ... Also of concern to U.S. officials, the Senate staff found, is a group of ‘nearly 10 non-Yemeni Americans who traveled to Yemen, converted to Islam, became fundamentalists, and married Yemeni women so they could remain in the country.’ ... An American official described them as ‘blond-haired, blue-eyed types’ who fit the profile of Americans who al-Qaeda has sought to recruit for terror missions.”

These, of course, are not the first Americans — “blond-haired, blue-eyed types” or otherwise — to convert to Islam and join the jihad: John Walker Lindh wound up fighting fellow Americans alongside Taliban forces in Afghanistan; Adam Gadahn became a major character in al-Qaeda’s propaganda machine; Gregory Patterson, Levar Washington, and Kevin James plotted terror strikes against the U.S.; Christopher Paul and Jose Padilla conspired to use weapons of mass destruction.

Then there are the countless European converts, such as the British “shoe-bomber,” Richard Reid, who attempted to achieve “martyrdom” by detonating explosives in his shoes while aboard a passenger aircraft; the late Germaine Lindsay, who did achieve “martyrdom” by killing himself and 56 of his fellow citizens and injuring over 700, in the London bombings of 2005; and Abu Abdullah, the native Briton-turned-fiery-Islamist-preacher who makes no secret of his vitriolic hatred of the West (all, of course, while enjoying that unique Western liberty, freedom of speech).

What causes such men, born and raised in the West, often from Christian backgrounds, to abandon their heritage, embrace Islam, and become radicalized to the point that they conspire to kill their fellow countrymen?

As for Islam’s intrinsic appeal, it has long been argued that, unlike Christianity, which can be “heavy” on theology, Islam is relatively simple and straightforward. Thus while Christianity may revolve around the metaphysical — the Trinity, Christology, even the notion of grace — Islam, in black-and-white terms, commands its adherents to do this and not do that. In fact, the Arabic word “Sharia,” that comprehensive body of laws Muslims are to obey, is etymologically related to the word for “pathway” — as in, “the pathway to paradise.”

Yet there is another, more subtle, factor that may entice men to Islam: traditional male roles are highlighted in the religion. This may appeal to non-Muslim men who want to assert their “masculinity” in what they perceive to be gender-free Western societies. Harvey Mansfield’s book, *Manliness*, defines that term as “a quality both bad and good, mostly male, often intolerant, irrational, and ambitious. Our gender-neutral society does not like it but cannot get rid of it.”

Indeed, with an ethical code that coalesced in the seventh century — when the Muslim prophet and “perfect example” walked the earth, enforced his will, and conquered his “infidel” neighbors — Islamic culture can hardly be deemed “gender-neutral.” Even philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who despised Christianity as “effeminate” and preached the need for man to be transformed into an amoral “hyper-man,” professed admiration for Islam, describing it as “noble and manly” (The Antichrist).

Of course, traditional masculine roles are not the sole domain of Islam; most civilizations have lived in accordance to such norms; so-called “gender-neutral societies” are, from a historical perspective, aberrant. James Bowman, author of *Honor: A History*, points out that, when it comes to the West’s disregard for notions of honor and masculinity, “we are, in global terms, the odd ones out”; he further asserts that, up until the Victorian era, in the West, “honor was rather closer to the Arab and Muslim idea of it today.”

It is in this context, then, that disaffected young men — who, like Nietzsche, despise what they perceive to be a “gender-neutral” society — may find a religion which emphasizes “masculinity” appealing.

John Walker Lindh especially seems to fit this paradigm. Precipitating his conversion to Islam was his teenage discovery that his father was homosexual — an event that appears to have traumatized and alienated Lindh. Islam’s masculine ideals and unequivocal condemnation of homosexuality may have lured young Lindh, who, soon after his father left his mother and moved in with another man, converted to Islam at age 16. Shortly thereafter, he went a-jihading.

This is all further exasperated by Muslims mocking Western masculinity — such as Osama bin Laden, who has ridiculed Western acceptance of homosexuality and characterized the American soldier as “a paper tiger” who is “too cowardly and too fearful to meet the young people of Islam face-to-face” (The Al Qaeda Reader).

Whatever position one may hold regarding these issues, one thing is clear: If traditional masculine virtues are upheld in Islamic culture, so too do traditional masculine vices abound — for it is often a very fine line that separates hyper-virtue from hyper-vice. Honor, courage, and patriarchic ethics can — and, in Islamic culture, regularly do — morph into destructive pride (e.g., “honor killings”), disdain for life (e.g., suicide bombings), and brutal misogyny.

Nonetheless, for those more “adventurous” young men looking to add a bit of “excitement” to their lives, Islam offers avenues. Based on the Koran and Muhammad’s biography, raiding, killing, and plundering infidels (i.e., the “other”), abducting their women, and enslaving their children are all permissible, so long as they are done in a jihadist context, that is, in the “service” of Islam. In fact, that is how the Islamic prophet and first Muslims spread Islam — a historical fact, not a slander — as attested to by Islam’s sacred texts and histories, written and compiled by pious, authoritative Muslims.

Of course, such behavior was “normal” in the seventh century. Then, wherever one looked, men of all races, creeds, and religions were raiding, pillaging, plundering, and enslaving their neighbors. For Islamists, however, the actions of seventh-century Muhammad, no matter how at odds with modernity, must be emulated today no less than yesterday. Moreover, any moral scruples a potential jihadist may experience over such “antiquated” practices — that is, should his conscience momentarily get the best of him — immediately dissipate in light of Allah’s explicit approval. For instance: “Married women are prohibited to you [Muslims] — except for those taken captive in war” (Koran 4:24; see also 23:6 and 33:50-52).

Little wonder, then, that Islam appeals to certain Western men over Christianity: Aspects of it better comport with man's baser proclivities — for war, possessions, and women — than, say, the passive and inhibiting teachings of Jesus: “turn the other cheek,” “pray for those who persecute you,” and “he who lusts after a woman in his heart has already committed adultery.” Even Islam's version of paradise is far more alluring. There, a river of wine and dozens of “voluptuous women” await the jihadist who dies battling infidels (see Koran 78:33).

And so, like mischievous little boys who find the pirate lifestyle fascinating — raiding, killing, plundering, abducting, hiding in caves — so do some Western men find the lifestyle of the jihadist captivating. So they convert. Nor is it any small irony that the physical appearance of today's Islamist heroes is reminiscent of those wily pirates of old — from the furtive Taliban leader, “One-Eyed” Mullah Muhammad Omar, to London's radical ideologue Abu Hamza, who not only boasts one eye, but has a metal hook for a hand which he used to shake menacingly when referring to infidels. (Like Walt Disney's Captain Hook, he was affectionately referred to by his followers simply as “The Hook.”)

It goes without saying, of course, that none of this is to imply that Muslims are piratical by nature. It is to say, however, that persons naturally inclined to such activities — including would-be converts — can and do find exoneration under the rubric of “sunna” and jihad legal theory: if it was okay for Muhammad and the first Muslims to wage war on, plunder, and enslave infidels — so the logic goes — surely it is okay today.

This phenomenon is further highlighted by the obvious intersection between prison incarceration and conversion to radical Islam. Indeed, most of the aforementioned proselytes had criminal records previous to their Islamic conversion, evincing a proclivity for violence and lawlessness: Reid and Abdullah had convictions for muggings; Padilla for gangster activity; and Lindsay for drug dealing. Patterson, Washington, and James began their terrorist cell while incarcerated in a very real cell for committing over a dozen armed robberies. And, most recently, the three dozen converts-turned-potential-terrorists who just fled to Yemen were all, as the ABC report puts it, “criminals.”

Traditionally, one of the reasons ex-cons turn to religion is to change their evil ways. Not so these Western men-turned-Islamic-terrorists. Consciously or unconsciously, it would seem they embraced Islamism — and subsequently jihadism — merely to receive divine sanctioning for their otherwise violent and rapacious behavior, being transformed in the process from petty criminals to major criminals — terrorists and traitors.

Originally published at: <http://pajamasmedia.com/blog/the-lure-of-radical-islam-or-boys-will-be-boys/>

Raymond Ibrahim is the associate director of the Middle East Forum, the author of *The Al Qaeda Reader*, and a visiting lecturer at the National Defense Intelligence College.