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*Terror and Revolt:
Examining Al Qaeda through the Lens of the Satsuma Rebellion*
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Since the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington in 2001, American political discourse has been saturated with speculation on terrorism; what causes it, how to combat it, what means we as a society must employ to protect ourselves from it, etc. Much of our fear is directed against those who perpetrated said attacks: the militant Islamic group Al Qaeda. Its leader, Osama bin Laden, has been hunted along with his compatriots through numerous countries. American laws have been written and rewritten to help the government better track and target those who may threaten American lives. And again and again the question is asked: can we stop Al Qaeda?

The answer seems bleak. These terrorists, by their actions, have demonstrated willingness, even eagerness, to die in the furtherance of their cause. Though vastly outnumbered and outgunned by the American military industrial complex, they are fearless and persistent. The promise of Paradise after death, knowing that Allah will reward those who fight in his name, turns these men and women into a force to be reckoned with.

McDougal describes religion functioning in this case as “A ‘force multiplier,’ inspiring greater zeal and sacrifice...”¹ But perhaps this idea can be carried a step further. What if we were to evaluate Al Qaeda as a religious phenomenon as well as a political and social one, one that we’ve seen permutations of before in the history of

Asian religion? What new insights might be gleaned from this examination of their motives and mentality? To answer this question, we must first define Al Qaeda in a religious light.

Crisis Cults: Religion and Identity

Weston LaBarre, the eminent anthropologist, pioneered the definition of the term “crisis cult” in relation to the Ghost Dance movement of Native Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century.² This group emerged at a time when the way of life Native Americans had practiced for centuries seemed on the verge of dying out. Continuous restriction and repression by the American government was pushing many tribes to the brink of extinction. It would take a massive change to revitalize such a lost and confused people.

This change took the form of an apocalyptic cult led by a prophet named Wovoka. A Paiute shepherd who had also been exposed to variants of Western Christianity, Wovoka had a vision of being taken up to Heaven and told of a time when all faithful tribes would ascend to a perfect world where there were no wars or white men.³ Miracles followed, and the Ghost Dance cult – named for its elaborate ritual dances and ceremonies of ancestor worship – was born.⁴

The real clincher in defining the Ghost Dance as a crisis cult is found among the Sioux, who rejected the common ban on violence the rest of the movement preached and encouraging instead militant resistance of the American cavalry.⁵ To aid in this battle against a technologically and numerically superior foe, the Sioux donned ornately-decorated cotton or muslin tunics called ‘Ghost Shirts’ which they claimed would deflect

bullets.⁶ This claim was explicitly disproved by the American cavalry, who slaughtered these attackers wholesale.⁷

From this example LaBarre paints a general outline of what crisis cults look like. They form when a nation or group of people is gripped by an identity crisis – in this case, overwhelming defeat and suppression at the hands of a technologically superior foe. Often elements of a new paradigm are introduced to the society, which is unable to cope with this using traditional means and methods.

Crisis cults emerge on the edge where the one social paradigm meets the other. “There is a ‘cognitive dissonance’ between competing systems which the syncretic cult somehow resolves.”⁸ Elements of one culture are incorporated with elements of the other to form a syncretic alloy. The Ghost Dance creates a vision of an Indian world with familiar Christian markers – Heaven, the Rapture, even Hell.⁹ Old teachings change to respond to the emergence of new paradigms and aspects of said paradigms are mutated into affirmations of those teachings.

At the same time, though, crisis cults often demonize the other, the source of the crisis, while simultaneously seeking to copy its most beneficial ways. Often this demonization escalates into violence against the new ways, as in the case of the Ghost Dancers, whose battles against cavalry were fierce, bloody and brutal despite the pacifism of their original doctrine.

Part of the ‘cognitive dissonance’ LaBarre describes is a kind of society-wide paranoia.¹⁰ Where two cultural paradigms clash and one has the clear advantage, the other tends to react negatively to the uncertainty created. Such a reaction is often hostile, forcing the worst-affected members of the stricken culture – often those who are most

susceptible to the rhetoric of crisis cults – to become even more acutely affected by this paranoia. Often they become willing to believe the worst of the conflicting culture, attributing to it the most heinous acts and the most unlikely motives.¹¹

Crisis cults also at times exhibit a morbid fascination or an eroticization of death.¹² In cases where the destruction of the cult's paradigm seems imminent and the suffering of its practitioners is prolonged, death will take on an enhanced attractiveness that makes desperate or fatal measures more palatable. Such a quality often provokes actions of enormous destructive scope, usually at the cost of cultist as well as enemy lives.

Al Qaeda as a Crisis Cult

Does Al Qaeda match the template of the crisis cult? It would seem to arise out of the conflict between Islamic culture and the outside world when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in the 1970s. To prevent Communist domination of the country, the United States began training Islamic militants in modern guerilla warfare.¹³ Muslim orthodoxy met Western tactical combat to produce a group of holy warriors who fought a political battle with religious zeal.

The supernatural aids Al Qaeda by making death almost desirable rather than something to fear. Death's promise of Paradise and numerous beautiful virgins eroticizes death in a way that to outside observers seems grotesque. This fervor-fueled fanaticism was aimed against communism originally, but has grown to include all non-Muslim cultural and political paradigms, especially the culturally evangelical United States.¹⁴ The hostility its members feel has led to the paranoid credulity mentioned above, in cases

like the rumors persistent in the Arab world that the Mossad – Israel’s intelligence agency – was responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Al Qaeda differs from many crisis cults, however, in the nature of the magical assistance its religious paradigm offers. Many cases make use of more overt magical assistance – the bullet-reflecting Ghost Shirts of the Ghost Dance, the Yongbu of the Korean Tonghak,¹⁵ etc. These supernatural aids are obvious and easily disproven. When a Ghost Dancer is felled by a bullet, it becomes clear to other practitioners that his magical assistance won’t work. Shaken in their faith, the cultists will abandon their cause.

Conversely, the assurance of Paradise cannot be disproven. Lacking in empirical evidence of the afterlife, there is no way to deny this more subtle covert magical assistance. The only way to stop warriors convinced of this assistance is to kill them – no mean feat considering how much damage they can do before then!

Covert Magical Assistance in History: The Sainen Revolt

Covert magical assistance is not without precedent in crisis cults. One such precedent comes from Japan in the late nineteenth century, when the new Meiji government set about reforming Japan into a modern industrial nation. Loathe to abandon their elevated feudal station, some samurai rose up against the new Shogunate.¹⁶ This revolution, called the Sainen Revolt, was an ugly war, made doubly so by the practice of Zen by the rebels.¹⁷

These rebel samurai used Zen meditation to remove the fear of death, turning them into fearless warriors of a dying age.¹⁸ Such men charged gatling gun batteries with

only swords and arrows, and when they fell it was with a great display of courage and martial prowess.

Implications of Sainen-Al Qaeda Similarity

The similarity between the Sainen rebels and Al Qaeda bodes ill regarding possible solutions. These renegade samurai chose to fight an impossible war rather than conform to new ways, and the only thing that would stop them was death. Considering their skill as fighters – coming as they did from a hereditary warrior caste and trained from childhood in the art of war – and the added fearlessness Zen Buddhism gave them, the rebels could do considerable damage before they were finally slain.¹⁹ If no solution exists for suppressing Al Qaeda save universal destruction, the war against them would require an enormous investment of time money and human life – larger, perhaps, than America or the West generally, is willing to spend.

After all, the West lacks the luxury of a foe charging gun emplacements with swords. Al Qaeda is a ruthless secret organization, using knowledge given to them by their foe to frighten, demoralize and intimidate a vastly more powerful opponent. Intelligence services admit that predicting or combating the moves of such an enemy is difficult – perhaps even impossible.²⁰ As for destroying an enemy that is nearly indistinguishable from the civilian population, the easiest solution – to wipe out the civilian population at large – is unthinkable. An alternative must be found to resolve the identity crisis between the West and Islam if further disaster is to be averted.

Buddhist Religious Adaptation in Meiji Japan

A solution may present itself if we push the Meiji comparison a little further. The samurai used Zen Buddhism, but they were not the only ones. The Buddhist clergy had functioned as an administrative network for the old Shogunate.²¹ When the Meiji government began to reform, many turned against them as corrupt symbols of a fallen regime. Other criticized Buddhism as a foreign faith, coming from degenerate nations and being antithetical to the new nationalist spirit which would guide Japan to modernity.²²

But somehow Buddhism survives into the modern age – someone must have been able to sell it to the Meiji regime. Indeed, many Buddhist priests and laymen encouraged the Emperor and prominent government officials to see their faith's biggest 'faults' as possible advantages. Because it was practiced in China, Korea and all over Southeast Asia, Buddhism was a pan-Asian movement that could stand against Western imperialism and preserve the sanctity of Asian culture.²³ Their experience with regional administration could prove invaluable to a modern bureaucracy.²⁴ Buddhist scholars published extensively on the concurrence of Buddhist doctrine and Japanese nativist ideology.²⁵ Buddhism was simply too useful to dispose of, its practitioners argued.

What finally sold the Meiji government on Buddhism, ironically, was the quality that made the Sainen rebels so effective. Buddhist priests and scholars pointed at the Zen meditative practice of the samurai honed by centuries of warriors and monks. This practice removed the fear of death, making its practitioners relentless fighters. If these methods could be imparted to a modern army – battalions of rifle-bearing peasant conscripts – then the advantage in any conflict would go to Japan.²⁶ The prospect of a

fearless modern army was too tempting for the Meiji officials to pass up. Buddhism had adapted to the demands of a changing time by conforming its values.

Muslim Religious Adaptation in the West

Does a faction exist in modern Islam which is analogous to the Buddhist priests of Meiji Japan? Are there those who will adapt their views to be more palatable to the West? It would seem that there are; many Muslim scholars in the West maintain that Islam itself is a religion of peace and tolerance, and that Al Qaeda is a heresy of the most horrific kind.²⁷ These scholars believe that their faith is distinct from but not in conflict with the culture and ideas of the West and that the two paradigms can coexist peacefully. They criticize the interpretation of *jihad* exclusively as a violent holy war and emphasize the spiritual conflict between a practitioner's own harmful passions and his or her divine and compassionate essence.²⁸ Lumbard decries the way Islamic law has been "abused by extremists so as to excuse and even promote suicide killings."²⁹

To call this movement a crisis cult would be misleading. The term itself relies at least in part on resistance to the new paradigms where Muslim moderates seek to embrace and interact with the West. And yet there are clearly elements we'd associate with crisis cults – an identity disorder caused by exposure to a different culture, a reinterpretation of classical religious doctrine in light of said identity disorder, etc.³⁰ It might be best to distinguish the moderates as practicing a crisis paradigm, since they are clearly responding religiously to a culturally stressful scenario.

To what extent this crisis paradigm is correct in its interpretation is outside the scope of this paper. What remains open as a question is: do these moderates present a

way for Islam to adapt to its encounter with Western culture without risking the possibly genocidal violence crisis cults like Al Qaeda have as their consequence? The answer is clearly affirmative. Appealing to the precedents of peaceful coexistence set by Islamic law – *sharia* – is an out for Muslims who seek harmony of cultures. Muslim moderates often make use of these precedents to demonstrate what they believe to be a theme of toleration and ecumenism central to Islamic thought and faith.³¹

The implications of the Muslim moderate crisis paradigm are more hopeful by far than those presented by Al Qaeda. Should their beliefs become widespread in the Muslim world, much of the support for Al Qaeda and similar groups will crumble. In time the cultists who continue to support them will die – either through their own efforts or at the hands of their enemies – or else become disenchanted and fade back into the general population. In the meantime, Muslim moderates may also bring other kinds of reform based on tolerance and justice – workers’ rights, free elections and other movements toward equality and social justice.

Unfortunately, though moderate philosophy is eminently beneficial to the West, the risks of the West promoting it are prohibitive. In the current climate of many Muslim nations – where Al Qaeda and groups of like mind are lauded as heroes boldly resisting a gang of inordinately more powerful imperialist military forces – any attempts made by the West to promote a thought or ideal are viewed with enormous suspicion. The paranoid credulity of the crisis cult is pervasive, and trying to sway the hearts and minds of Muslims would be a hard-won success at best and a disastrous failure at worst.

The shift to moderation must come from within. As it becomes clearer to the citizens of Muslim nations that support of Al Qaeda and its ilk leads to penalties from

economic sanction to armed invasion, such a shift will become more and more attractive. It would perhaps be overly optimistic to say it is only a matter of time, but the possibility exists, and should it occur would be beneficial for all parties involved.

The Darker Consequences of Moderation

The solution above is, of course, an ideal version of the scenario. The possibility that the moderate paradigm will fail to become prevalent exists. In this case, as Al Qaeda becomes more widespread, the West faces an enemy that knows its methods and cannot be effectively and totally stopped. But do negative consequences present themselves in the scenario where moderation does take hold?

The answer to this can be found in further pursuit of the Sainen-Al Qaeda connection. After Pro-Meiji Buddhists were incorporated into the new culture of Japan, the Buddhist priesthood and laity became intimately tied with the new state religion of Shinto. Shinto holds the Emperor of Japan as one of its ultimate deities, a direct descendant of the sun goddess. As such, it tended inevitably to support the actions of the new Meiji government, which was supposedly more directly headed by the emperor than the Shogunate before it had been.³²

Because of this support, Buddhists found themselves involved in training soldiers variants of Zen that would make them more fearless in battle.³³ These tactics were used to great and terrible effect in the Russo-Japanese War,³⁴ the Sino-Japanese War³⁵ and finally World War II, whose excesses included the horrific Rape of Nanjing.³⁶ Buddhists priests, Zen masters and pious lay people became soldiers, murderers and rapists. Hundreds of thousands were killed at Nanjing alone, the most grievous of Japan's

wartime atrocities. To this day the Chinese government and people remember the crimes of these soldiers with the clarity of trauma, while until recently the Japanese government and people had all but forgotten them.³⁷

Can such a circumstance be repeated in the case of Muslim moderation? The answer is difficult to determine. It is clear, however, that these moderates speak against Al Qaeda as a heresy or abomination. Should they come into political authority over areas where Al Qaeda and similar crisis cults operate, they may pursue them with the most extreme fervor and ferocity. Moderates may also grant nations like the United States carte blanche in finding and stopping crisis cultists. The level of destructive force brought to bear in this matter may be extreme, as this agenda is pursued with little or no concern for the well-being of innocents hurt in the process. Torture, terror tactics, perhaps even the barbaric extremity of massacres could be employed. Indeed, the ruthlessness and stealth of the quarry may leave the hunters precious few other options.

As a culture that has consistently preached mercy and justice toward our enemies, these actions would be abhorrent to the West. Unfortunately, Muslim moderation may legitimize such a response in the name of protecting their vision of Islam. It will be up to those in power, both in the West and in Muslim nations, to make such decisions if and when that juncture is reached. In the meantime, the utmost caution must be taken in attempting to guide and nurture Muslim moderation in the West.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine in advance what the 'best' course of action would be to stop Al Qaeda. If it and its fellow terrorist groups are behaving as crisis cults, all that can

be done is to wait and hope that it will die out and that moderate Muslims will be successful in guiding the future of the Islamic world. Ideally countries like the United States would also not spend this waiting time further antagonizing the Muslim world, especially the Arabic-speaking nations, since these countries will be crucial in winning the ideological war against the crisis cultists. If the West cannot change those things about itself which are hated – unnecessary and ill-advised, since the paranoia of the cult is probably such that no change will be fully satisfactory – it should not deliberately take steps that would exacerbate the problem.

Endnotes

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5. Ibid, p. 87
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7. Ibid, p. 203
8. LaBarre, p. 277
9. Utley, p. 91
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21. Ketelaar, James Edward. Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan, p. x
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23. Ibid, p. 175
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