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BIN LADEN'S FORMATION OF THE SELF:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Following the 9/11 and similar al-Qaeda attacks, one of the principle questions we ask as a Western Society is why? Researchers on religious terrorism generally agree that psychopathic labelling and descriptions are both unhelpful and inaccurate. Instead what is needed is a look at the broader sociological context. As a result, this paper utilises Foucault's technologies of the self (formation of the self) as a framework to explore the self transformations and teleology of Osama bin Laden's actions based on a comparative analysis with the biblical character of Moses. This analysis will include a number of important parallels which include: the rejection of wealth for self gain and privilege, self formation and transformation through trial and suffering, a spokesperson for a captive and oppressed people, as well as being the instrument of God's wrath through the delivering of the plague of terror. Such insights can contribute to understanding the broad dimensions of this social context that extends well beyond the political domain.

Keywords

Sociology of terrorism, Foucault, technologies of the self, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Given the recent tenth anniversary of 9/11 and the killing of bin Laden this year, it is important to explore how bin Laden formed himself and what impact this may have on those who view him as an inspiration. There are many ways to view bin Laden's life and beliefs. Different studies have focused on different aspects of bin Laden such as his biography (Bergen, 2006; Mockaitis, 2010), as well as his role as a CEO of a terrorist organisation (Hoffman, 2003). In contrast, this paper conducts a comparative analysis with a well-known Biblical narrative, that is, the story of the prophet Moses who led the Israelites out from the slavery of Egypt. At this point the question may arise, given his Muslim faith, would not Mohammad be a better figure of comparison? In response, it is conceded that indeed bin Laden did embrace and share the teleology of Mohammed and this has been discussed by others (such as Aboul-Enein, 2004). However, the Mosaic parallels are also very striking and have the added advantage of being a shared narrative between all the Abrahamic religions (Islam, Judaism and Christianity), thus having the potential to deepen our sociological understanding of not only bin Laden, but also those in his al-Qaeda organisation as well as its sympathisers. In addition, it is a narrative that many in the West are much more familiar with, thus aiding in understanding bin Laden's actions and motivations to a greater degree.

An important question arises, is the comparison with Moses made by the author or bin Laden himself? This comparative analysis is made by the author on the basis of similarities with bin Laden's life as well as references made in his discourse. To aid in this comparative analysis, Michel Foucault's framework on technologies of the self (formation of the self) and will be used to explore religious dimensions of terrorism and influences on bin Laden.

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

Technologies of the self are essentially a form of self-government (Petersen, 2003) and include techniques aimed at achieving self transformation (Foucault, 2007). To explore these techniques, Dean's (1999) framework developed from Foucault's work has been outlined in Table 1 along with an overview of bin Laden that will be further developed throughout the paper.

An important caveat is also needed upfront. Although bin Laden embraces the Islamic faith, analysis of technologies of the self are specific to bin Laden himself and while some aspects may be able to be broadened to members of al-Qaeda and Islamic religious terrorism, comparisons cannot be made with the broader Islamic faith. All dimensions strongly support the centrality of this religious dimension in Islamic based terrorism.

Table 1 – Overview of bin Laden's Technologies of the Self

Dimension of Technology of the Self	Application to Osama bin Laden
1) <u>Ontology</u> – WHAT we seek to act upon (i.e. the governed or ethical substance).	Emotions and sense of grievance faced by Muslims (Jandora, 2006).
2) <u>Ascetics</u> – HOW we govern this substance (i.e. the governing or ethical work).	Submission and sacrifice through training of oneself for the greater cause of Allah (Maliach, 2008).
3) <u>Deontology</u> – WHO we are when we are governed (i.e. our mode of subjectification).	A warrior, a freedom fighter (the path of Jihad) (McAuley, 2005). A prophet
4) <u>Teleology</u> – WHY we are governed (i.e. the end or goals sought, what we hope to become).	Islamic Caliphate – freedom for Muslims from Western Oppression (Gerecht, 2002).

RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF TERRORISM

Before looking specifically at bin Laden, it is imperative to contextualise the broader religious context of both Islam and the Mosaic narrative. Muslims believe that Allah gave the message to Moses but that followers corrupted the message (Mockaitis, 2010). The Qu'ran recognises and builds on scripture such as the Taurat given to Moses, who is recognised as an important prophet of God (Copinger-Symes, 2003). What is important in the Mosaic narrative is that Moses himself is not only a religious leader but also a political one. This fact cannot be overlooked especially given that Islam is not only a religion but also a socio-political system (Hashim, 2001), one that reflects the Jewish nation under Egyptian captivity in the Mosaic narrative. In contrast to Christianity, that was initially divorced of politics and then eventually became politicised with the Constantine Empire; Islam was immediately fused with political power and this is an important aspect in understanding its socio-historical context (Copinger-Symes, 2003). Ironically, this religious-political fusion was exploited by the intelligence agencies of the US and Pakistan (CIA and ISI) who used this socio-political idea to motivate the mujahedeen to fight the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Chossudovsky, 2001).

Despite the usefulness of this political-religious fusion during the Cold War, the West has subsequently sought to separate religion from politics particularly in efforts to create the 'instant democracy', overlooking the fact that political discourses are an essential aspect of the Islamic faith (Fuller, 2002, p. 50). In response to the formation of secular states such as Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to once again fuse Islamic fundamentalism with political power (Islamism) based on Sharia law (Oden, 2007). One of the most influential thinkers that embraced this religious political fusion and called for a rejection of national governments that were not primarily based on the Qu'ran was Sayyid Qutb (also a member of the Muslim Brotherhood) (Mockaitis, 2010; Oden, 2007). Like many others, bin Laden was highly influenced by Qutb (Evans, 2007; Kobrin, Winer, & Anderson, 2003; Mockaitis, 2010). This influence comprised of lectures given by Qutb's brother (Mohammed Qutb) that bin Laden attended at King Abdul Aziz University in the late 1970's (Evans, 2007). In addition, bin Laden admired Qutb's book, *Milestones*, that Qutb wrote while he was imprisoned and later died as a martyr (Mockaitis, 2010).

Qutb's book, *Milestones*, highlights an admiration for the Mosaic narrative and the religious-political nexus present among the Israelites at that time:

> This history of the call witnessed the annihilation of Pharaoh and his army, and the escape of Moses and his people and the establishment of their authority in the land. Those people of that time were the most righteous in all their (the Israelites) history, although they did not attain complete steadfastness nor establish the religion of God on earth in its entirety; and this example is different from the previous ones.

Here Qutb admires the defeat of Pharaoh and the establishment of a new 'righteous' political order. This concept, as we shall see, is also very much present in bin Laden's discourse. In drawing parallels between bin Laden and Moses we must first note that bin Laden did emphasise this religious dimension. One signifier of this is that initially bin Laden issued a fatwa (23 February 1998) in conjunction with Islamic leaders (Copinger-Symes, 2003, p. 57). However, his emphasis changed to being a man of action rather than words (Hashim, 2001). According to McAuley (2005) religious authority in Islam depends more on action rather than theological training forming the basis of bin Laden to call himself a 'sheikh'.

BIN LADEN'S MOSAIC DISCOURSE – CONCEPTUALISING SELF AND OTHER

Bin Laden's discourse makes a clear distinction between self and other. Examination of bin Laden's discourse reveals that he is more concerned about situating the evil 'other', consequently situating the self in a more indirect manner. This section will be divided into two parts with help from Foucault's technologies of the self, namely: ethics and identity. First, technologies of the self look at how individuals regulate their own behaviour given their sense of ethics (Foucault, 1997c). As Dean's (1999) framework outlines, any techniques to govern self will by nature require an ethical framework. Second, Foucault (1997c) makes it clear that regimes of truth and other techniques are used by individuals to determine, maintain and/or transform their identities.

Ethics of Grievance

Bin Laden's 'myth of grievance' (Jandora, 2006, p. 41) also represents his ethical framework. Foucault (1997b) is clear that one's ontology (see Table 1) carries with it an important ethical dimension in that it reveals how we constitute ourselves as moral agents. Additionally, given that technologies of the self are one part of the governmentality axis intersecting with other forms of subjectification, it also reveals how others are invited or influenced to embrace a specific ontological view (Foucault, 1997a). Specifically, bin Laden's aim is for his fellow Muslims to embrace his ontology of grievance. That is, an ethic of grievance that is strongly focused on the 'enemy other', namely the US, Israel and their allies. The lack of 'ethics' of the 'other' is used as a justification for the actions of 'self' as bin Laden outlines:

> American history does not distinguish between civilians and military, not even women and children. They are the ones who used bombs against Nagasaki. Can these bombs distinguish between infants and military? America does not have a religion that will prevent it from destroying all people.

> (Cited in Miller, 1999, p. 11)

Such an ethic is symptomatic of a response mentality parallel to the Israeli oppression under Pharaoh in the Mosaic narrative as bin Laden reasons in the National Catholic Reporter (2004), 'No, we fight because we are free men who don't sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation, just as you lay waste to our nation.'; And similarly: 'What we want and what we are demanding are the rights of every living being. We demand that our land be freed from our enemies, and that our land be freed from Americans.'(cited in Aboul-Enein, 2004, p. 110). Discursively, bin Laden (cited in Lawrence & Laden, 2005) directly invokes the myth of the Mosaic narrative by linking President Bush with Pharaoh: 'What Bush – the pharaoh of the age – is doing, killing our sons in Iraq …' (p. 174, emphasis added) and 'History knows that one who kills children, even if rarely is a follower of Pharaoh' (p. 147). Elsewhere, bin Laden more specifically links the killing of children in Palestine to pharaoh's abuse of power and oppression. These quotes relate to pharaoh's attempts to control the Israeli male population in order to keep them oppressed: 'Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."' (Exodus 1: 22 NIV).

Notwithstanding the horrific images of dead children, this ethic of grievance runs deeper to incorporate a humiliation and shame (Jandora, 2006). Once again, this parallels the Mosaic narrative where the Israelites were treated as slaves, exploited, oppressed and humiliated by Pharaoh. Images of shame and exploitation are also well utilised in bin Laden' discourse:

> Your situation with Muslims in Palestine is shameful--if there is any shame left in America. Houses were demolished over the heads of children. Also, by the testimony of relief workers in Iraq, the

American-led sanctions resulted in the death of more than one million Iraqi children. All of this is done in the name of American interests. We believe that the biggest thieves in the world and the terrorists are the Americans.

(Cited in Miller, 1999, p. 8)

In their psychoanalytic notes on bin Laden, Kobrin, Winer and Anderson (2003) reflect that while having a clear dichotomy of self and other in relation to the West, bin Laden had a much more blurred sense of self and other when it came to the humiliation of fellow Muslims. The danger is that this shared sense of humiliation is felt by many Muslims giving bin Laden's discourse and his Mosaic narrative, however indirect and cryptic, wide appeal.

On reflection of the tragic events of 9/11 and the lessons that could be gleaned, Walt (2001) emphasised that US foreign policy was not cost free and that perceptions of the US by others did not match its own idealism. Snyder (2003) agrees, stating the US is widely viewed in the Middle East as an imperial power. Specifically, economic injustices and social alienation has resulted in many other groups joining al-Qaeda (Stern, 2003). Moreover, leaders have harnessed this sense of humiliation to create an addictive thirst for jihad (Stern, 2003). Consequently, Oden (2007) warns that resistive and terrorist actions will continue until perceived oppressions, humiliations and exploitations are rectified. Thus, an ethics of grievance demands a response, one that is intertwined with identity

Identity of Empowerment

Having situated the 'other' as Pharaoh or the oppressor, it is also important for bin Laden to add to the situating of the 'self' through a sense of identity. Although bin Laden does not directly claim to be a prophet or deliverer, he does promote an identity of empowerment. Like the Mosaic narrative, bin Laden highlights Allah's power as fundamental for deliverance. A case in point is bin Laden's response to US troops in Saudi Arabia: '…there is no power except by Allah. We desire to instigate the community (Copinger-Symes) to undertake the liberation of their land' (bin Laden cited in Aboul-Enein, 2004, p. 110). While a demonstration of power is critical for liberation in the Mosaic narrative, unlike the Israelites who took on a more passive form of agency to witness the power of God, bin Laden calls on Muslims for a more active sense of agency to take action knowing that they will be empowered by Allah. To create this sense of transformation from passive to active agency, bin Laden evokes tribal and warrior imagery and contrasts this with the weak, self decadent nature of the US (McAuley, 2005). Furthermore, bin Laden also makes references to the 'Judeo-Christian crusade' in reference to both US forces in Saudi Arabia and Israeli occupation of Palestine (Oden, 2007, p. 58).

An identity of empowerment represents a fundamental deontology, or technique of subjectification (see Table 1). What bin Laden has essentially done is build on the foundational Mosaic narrative of the call of freedom from oppression and the powerful deliverance that followed an active agency through other religious narratives and imagery such as Mohammed the warrior and the warriors of the Crusades. Such discourse and imagery has motivated many followers to seek this teleology of liberation (Gerecht, 2002; Stern, 2003). Here we also see a dual deontology for bin Laden. On the one hand, he shared the active agency of a warrior with those whom he sought to inspire and on the other hand, he was also a prophetic type figure who called for warriors to join him in this liberation. Despite the influential nature of bin Laden's discourse, his ethics of grievance to motivate and his identity of empowerment to create an active agency, it was his actions that were most admired by others, actions that very much parallel the Mosaic narrative.

MOSAIC PARALLELS OF BIN LADEN'S LIFE

As previously stated, it was bin Laden's actions more so than his words that contributed to his sense of religious and prophetic authority. This section will explore important parallels with the life and actions of Moses including: privileged upbringing coupled with embracing the ascetic lifestyle, transformation through trial, spokesperson for his people and deliverer of plagues.

Rejection of Privilege and Embracing the Ascetic Lifestyle

Bin Laden was a member of a large family, his father was wealthy having established his own construction company. Nevertheless, bin Laden's father died when he was a child, a fact that bin Laden highlights in order to indicate his independence at an early age as well as a similarity with the prophet Mohammad who was also orphaned early (Aboul-Enein, 2004). Likewise, the prophet Moses was also orphaned from his real family at an early age as described in Exodus 2:1-8.

The Mosaic narrative continues with Moses showing an affinity for his people by striking out at the Egyptian slave masters (Exodus 2: 11-15). Moses was then forced to flee to the desert, forsaking his life of wealth and privilege. Similarly, bin Laden forsook his life of wealth and privilege to help his people. In fact, bin Laden glorifies this idea of worldly ascetism while still acknowledging the wealth of oil rights for the Saudi people in addition to being proud of his father's success (McAuley, 2005). Essentially, bin Laden was not anti-wealth, but rather wealth should be used in the service of Allah while simultaneously embracing an ascetic lifestyle. Bin Laden's image of adopting an ascetic lifestyle is well known and helped him to attain a sense of religious or prophetic authority (McAuley, 2005). Adding to this comparative dimension of the austere prophet are images captured of bin Laden's home in Afghanistan, akin to archaeological artefacts (Langlands & Bell, 2004).

Foucault (1997b) in his historical studies of technologies of the self noted that for early Christians, ascetics was an important mode of subjectification or training and that essentially it was only through sacrifice of the self that truth could be illuminated. Nevertheless, for bin Laden, given his teleology of liberation, it is not access to the truth that is developed through ascetics, rather it is the discipline of training needed by warriors to carry out their duty. Essentially, warriors must undergo a form of sacrifice and subjectification for a greater cause. Not only did bin Laden himself embrace the sacrifice of an ascetic lifestyle but also encouraged and admired those who do the same. When bin Laden was asked during an interview why he gave up his wealth and privileged lifestyle to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, he simply noted that he was just one of many:

> During the days of jihad, thousands of young men who were well-off financially left the Arabian Peninsula and other areas and joined the fighting. Hundreds of them were killed in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya.

<div align="right">(Cited in Miller, 1999, p. 7)</div>

This 'humility' of being just one of many is an attempt to build a collective identity of Muslims whose technologies of the self should be one of sacrifice and embracing the ascetic lifestyle in order to embrace the teleology of liberation.

Transformation through Trial and the Mandate of a Prophet - Afghanistan

Adopting an ascetic lifestyle is only one stage of the journey; a transformation of the self is also needed. For Moses, being forced to flee to the desert (Exodus 2:15) and then a transformation took place through a meeting with God in Exodus 3, where Moses was given his mandate: 'So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.' (Exodus 3:10 NIV).

Escaping persecution by fleeing was part of bin Laden's journey and helped to build his appeal: 'A wealthy man who chose hardship in Afghanistan, a 'persecuted man' who repeatedly fled countries to escape the hostility of Americans and their Middle Eastern allies, bin Laden evokes the prophetic tradition.'(Gerecht, 2002, p. 47). Yet prior to this it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that gave bin Laden his mandate. Not only was bin Laden instrumental in bringing thousands of Arab fighters to Afghanistan, his construction equipment was essential in developing mountain roads, hospitals and storage bunkers (Fisk, 1998; Hashim, 2001). These actions were foundational to bin Laden's status as a war hero (Fisk, 1998). In addition, bin Laden not only contributed much

of his own money but also raised funds from wealthy Arab businessmen to fund the war in which he was a very active participant, fighting on the front lines (Lesch, 2002). Afghanistan was bin Laden's 'burning bush', his point of transformation. It elevated bin Laden's status and destroyed the myth of superpower invisibility; the jihad against the Soviet occupation had been a success (Fuller, 2002; Miller, 1999). Despite such success, bin Laden was later to face humiliation.

Humiliation of the Rejection of the Mosaic call to Liberate Kuwait

In 1990 when Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait, bin Laden felt that he and his victorious mujahedeen should have been the one's called upon to liberate Kuwait, after all, only Muslims should defend a place of such religious significance (Jandora, 2006; Lesch, 2002). Bin Laden had offered his services and those of his followers to lead the liberation (Lesch, 2002; Oden, 2007). Bin Laden and his militants were shocked and humiliated when large numbers of US troops were invited in to liberate Kuwait (McAuley, 2005). Bin Laden was stripped of his Mosaic mandate to lead the liberation and was furious with the Saudi government, condemning them of 'collaborating with crusaders' (Oden, 2007, p. 58). Bin Laden was also angered by the continuing US presence in Saudi Arabia and was later stripped of his Saudi citizenship in 1994 for his protests and responded by bombing a US military compound in 1995 (Snyder, 2003). Bin Laden's teleology had not only been taken, but stolen by his enemy. Consequently, bin Laden searched for another avenue for his mandate.

Spokesperson for the Oppression of his people – Prophet and Revolutionary

Bin Laden's discourse emphasised that the US and Israel, like the pharaoh in the Mosaic narrative, sought to dominate and oppress the Muslim world (Aboul-Enein, 2004). In response, bin Laden created a myth or illusion of a Mosaic type prophetic spokesperson. He was perceived as non-corrupt and unwavering the in face of greater powers that sought to oppress and exploit (Edwards, 2001). Bin Laden sought to restore honour and pride to the Islamic people that had been stripped away by its oppressors (Gerecht, 2002). In similar vein, Snyder (2003, p. 328) conceptualises bin Laden as a 'civilizational revolutionary'. He organised the 'masses' from below and sought to implement political change (through liberation) (Snyder, 2003). Naturally, bin Laden's ability to be a revolutionary or prophet gained popular support from a number of areas including: alienation created from imperialism (Snyder, 2003), negative consequences of the economic sanctions against Iraq, and perhaps most significantly, Palestinian oppression and US support of Israel (Lesch, 2002).

Bin Laden as the Deliverer of the Plagues of Terror

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the Mosaic narrative is the response to oppression and the failure of pharaoh to comply, namely, the ten plagues unleased upon Egypt (Exodus 7-11). The events of 9/11 were indeed a major plague of terror delivered upon the US in an attempt by bin Laden to pursue his teleology of liberation. Bin Laden's aim was to further polarise relations between Muslims and the West (Jandora, 2006). Other Al-Qaeda members have followed with similar but smaller scale plagues of terror.

CONTINUED INFLUENCE OF BIN LADEN

After the events of 9/11, many in the West felt threatened by Islam, but many failed to realise that significant numbers in the Muslim world perceived the global order as skewed against them, seeking to oppress and exploit them (Fuller, 2002). In 2005, over 50% of those polled in Jordan and Pakistan supported bin Laden (Evans, 2007). Further evidence of support was provided by the vast bin Laden merchandise such as T-shirts and action figures available in many countries (Evans, 2007). Recent polls outlined by Ballen (2008) reported that 15% of Saudis and 24% of Pakistani's supported bin Laden, but surprisingly supporters were no more radical in their views and had similar views supporting free press and elections than non-supporters. Ballen (2008) identified that the primary reason for support was a shared Mosaic teleology, that is, to have their views and identity respected as well as the right to self-determination. A perception of Western hostility towards Islam is still widely held in many countries (Ballen, 2008). It appears that while bin Laden's methods (ascetics and deontology) may not be widely accepted, his teleology of liberation from perceived exploitation and oppression is much more widely shared. Despite his death, he is still perceived by many radicals as a martyr and a hero.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the purpose of this comparative analysis was to help illuminate a broader sociological perspective of some of the root causes of terrorism. A comparative analysis of Osama bin Laden with the Mosaic narrative revealed many parallels in both discourse and lifestyle. Given that the story of Moses is a widely known narrative across many faiths helps us to better understand bin Laden's beliefs and actions as well as those of his followers. While bin Laden's model of the self is not shared by the majority of Muslims, his grievance of oppression and the need for action is a sentiment shared by many. As long as these beliefs are held, there is always the risk of individuals being recruited and adopting bin Laden's complete technology of the self including the embracing of violent jihad.

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