

‘Jihad’ really means to strive for the sake of God

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

Columbus Dispatch (Faith and Values), July 12, 2002

Difficulties in communication between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans are increased by inaccurate preconceptions, heightened emotions and media sensationalism. The recent controversy evoked by the word jihad in the title of a Harvard graduating senior’s commencement address exemplified all of these.

Zayed Yasin was selected to speak by the Harvard faculty. His address, initially titled “My American Jihad,” focused on shared Muslim and American values and discussed the common Muslim understanding of jihad as a struggle to do the right thing.

Before the commencement, however, some students who neither had heard nor read the speech were offended by the word jihad in its title. They led a crusade against the address, insisting that the use of the word implied support for violence in the name of Islam. Despite faculty reassurances about the “healing” and “nonconfrontational” nature of the speech, Harvard’s campus erupted in controversy and protest.

Infotainment programs masquerading as news shows sensationalized the issue by emphasizing preconceptions and playing up hysteria. That these shows were interested in ratings, not understanding, was obvious because they extensively covered the prespeech controversy over the word but had minimal to no coverage of the actual speech.

In the speech, which was delivered unchanged in text but with a modified title, the American-born Muslim graduate encouraged his classmates to go out and make the world better. His address was deemed worthy of a standing ovation by many in his audience but apparently did not generate enough controversy to warrant much further media coverage.

I understand why many have such a negative emotional response to the word jihad. The terrorists who murdered thousands of innocent people on Sept. 11 used it to describe their actions. The American media and English dictionaries often translate this word as “holy war.” We sometimes hear the claim that it refers to Muslims trying to force conversions to Islam.

It is no wonder that people who seriously and thoughtfully try to understand the Muslim perspective on this word are surprised when they uncover its true, original meaning.

In Arabic, the translation of “holy war” is not jihad but *harb muqaddas*. This term never appears in the Quran. The word jihad is derived from the Arabic root *j-h-d*, which means to strive or exert effort. To Muslims, jihad means to strive for the sake of God. This striving encompasses both a person’s internal struggle to do the right thing, which Prophet Muhammad defined as the “greater jihad,” and his or her external struggle to implement goodness in society.

Jihad can include a struggle on the battlefield, the “lesser jihad,” but only in self-defense or to relieve oppression. The Quran warns: “Fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love the aggressors” (2:190).

Huston Smith, an internationally recognized scholar of religions, wrote on Oct. 25 that the concept of war acceptable in Islam “is virtually identical with the “just war” concept in Christian canon law, right down to the notion that martyrs in both

are assured of entering heaven. In both cases, the war must be defensive or fought to right a manifest wrong. Chivalry must be observed and the least possible damage inflicted to secure the end in question. And hostilities must cease when the objective is accomplished. Retaliation is disallowed.”

For Muslims, jihad means striving for good in every aspect of life. Jihad is speaking out for the truth, even if it is against one’s own interests. Jihad is giving to the needy despite fear of poverty. Jihad is working hard to gain knowledge and using that knowledge to benefit humanity. Jihad is making a stand against those who do wrong in the world, whether they are powerful or weak, relatives or strangers, Muslim or non-Muslim. Jihad is having the strength not to begin hostilities but, if needed, it is defending self, family, property or faith.

Extremists have twisted the concept of jihad into “holy war” for their own political ends. They know they can motivate discontented masses more effectively under the banner of religious sentiment than under the banner of their political agendas. By suggesting that all Muslims subscribe to the “holy war” definition, others seek to manipulate emotions and prejudices to create a climate of fear and hysteria. They then personally benefit, having created the market for their own “expertise.”

To understand any complex issue or event, people have to put their preconceptions on hold, calm their emotions, refuse to be taken in by sensationalism and hatemongering, and really listen. Voices such as Yasin’s, which strive to further understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, need to be heard. Harvard should be commended for appreciating this need and supporting him.

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