

A Canticle For Osama Bin Laden

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Diluvium Ignis (The Flame Deluge)

Walter M. Miller's classic science fiction story *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) depicts a post-apocalyptic world where the Roman Catholic Church has become the custodian of civilization's remaining knowledge-base. After the Great Simplification, the priesthood regards the remnants of nuclear weaponry as sacred ikons that possess heterodox powers, the archaic symbols of fading memories.

Miller's evocative study of complex moral and social issues cast the die for Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980) and J.G. Ballard's *Hello America* (1981), two novels that explored how nuclear weaponry may be fetishized within post-apocalyptic religions. Miller's vision has now become a terrifying reality, a geopolitical Wild Card that may shape the future of Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

Negotium Perambulans in Tenebris (The Pestilence That Stalks In Darkness)

While researching Osama bin Laden's background for a *New York Times* piece (25 June 1998), journalist Jeffrey Goldberg interviewed Samiul Haq, a seventeen-year-old Muslim teacher who taught nine-year-old students to worship the Koran and the Muslim Bomb.

After explaining to Goldberg that Muslims should wage *jihad* against Israel, Russia, and Serbia, Haq then retorted, "Listen, if you Americans don't stop pestering us about the Taliban, we'll give them the nuclear bomb. How would you like that?"

The national holiday Yaum-e-Takbeer celebrates Pakistan's first nuclear test on 28 May 1998. The nuclear test took US intelligence by surprise. Goldberg describes how monuments to the test have been built throughout the major cities, complete with eerie lightshow recreations of the fiery blast. Celebrants worship the radioactive fragments as religious artefacts that can bestow their powers upon families and country.

Goldberg interviewed Fazlur Rahman Khalil, a real-life reversal of Father Liebowitz, who vowed, if necessary, to use nuclear weapons to end the conflict over Kashmir. Khalil's pro-nuclear stance—that God bestowed Pakistan with the Bomb to enlighten a corrupted world—fulfils the macrohistorian and philosopher Oswald Spengler's unnerving prediction that the West would be eclipsed by hordes who used its knowledge and technology against it.

The rise-to-globalism of Osama bin Laden also recalls Muslim macrohistorian Ibn Khaldun's thesis that the cultural elites would corrupt themselves and be displaced by triumphant Bedouin tribes (the thesis was explored in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series). These macrohistorical theories don't confer legal or moral legitimacy upon Osama bin Laden's terrorist campaign, yet do suggest that the campaign is an opening gambit in a War on Terrorism that will be shaped, in turn, by the apocalyptic style of geopolitics. This apocalyptic style encompasses new bio-chemical warfare technology, resource shortages, 'operations-other-than-war', insights from complex adaptive systems research, and an appreciation of weapons as religiopolitical tools to inflame the populace and deter their sworn enemies.

Sic Transit Mundus (Thus Passes The World)

The looming clash between the West and militant forms of Islam embodies more than Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* model. Social cycles and technological innovation have created a fractal sense of time: we simultaneously live in different psychological spaces. Osama bin Laden reveals this fractal complexity, fusing a reverence for family and tribal order with absolutistic thinking and an appreciation of technology. A terrorist does not need to have developed the systems of thinking that built the technology in order to use it against a civilization.

While they fulfil their purpose to galvanize their audiences to take action, media stereotypes of terrorists largely fail to capture this fractal complexity, increasing the difficulty of successfully profiling and outwitting the opponents who endanger our society. They overlook the individual's psychohistory, ignore the cultural imprinting points, and obscure personal motivations. And stereotypes ignore the gaps in our own cultural and societal evolution, such as the widening post-17th century gap between Democratic ideals and Reason, that may be seized upon by others to justify their actions.

Walter M. Miller's brooding vision was fiction, but terrorists like Osama bin Laden are intent on making this religiopolitical apocalypse a frightening reality: an intent that may imprint on the generations of fundamentalist Muslim warriors to come. Will the War on Terrorism become a *Forever War* that never really ends?