

Dr. Volkan's review of

Muhammad and the Rise of Islam: The Creation of Group Identity

Subhash C. Inamdar. Madison, CT: Psychosocial Press, 2001. 226 pages.

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The events of September 11, 2001 have transfixed an otherwise indifferent public on the Muslim world. We hear about the training of suicide bombers, are exposed to terms like *jihad*—which refers to a personal struggle to reach higher consciousness but is popularly used to mean a holy war—and we connect similar activities and concepts with Islam. Before September 11th, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians was often generalized as a conflict between Jews and Moslems. After September 11th, other events in the Islamic world also captured the attention of the general public in the West as well as the rest of the world to an unprecedented degree, and the divisions that these events relate have shifted the focus from divisions between Islam and Judaism. These divisions are not new. When the 1978 revolution took place in Iran, it was perceived to a great extent as a division between Shi'i Islam and the “Great Satan,” representing in our minds mostly the Christian West, especially the United States. Meanwhile, the basic origins and motives of the Iranian revolution remained obscure as they are still misunderstood by many non-Muslims, if not by many Muslims as well (MacEoin, 1983).

Since the attacks, a broader public has read stories about the Taliban, stories that sometimes appear to many non-Moslems, as well as some Moslems, as if such events are taking place on another planet or a far-distant past. Moslem extremism often is generalized, leading to stereotyping and confirming popular misconceptions and existing prejudices, in spite of unusual events connected with non-Moslem religious extremism such as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in Israel (Moses-Hrushovski, 2000) and the Waco incident in the United States. I do not mean, of course that there are not many scholars, journalists and lay-people in the West and elsewhere in the non-Moslem world who are well-informed about Islam. Nevertheless, what Dennis MacEoin, an expert in Islamic Studies had said in 1983 still holds true today: “Ignorance of things Islamic may not, perhaps be a whit inferior to ignorance of things Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, or Buddhist, but it is still disproportionate to the importance of Islam in world affairs and reflects a persistence of ethnocentric attitudes which are sure to prove increasingly counter-productive within the context of growing political and cultural interdependence.” (p. ix) While the world now looks toward understanding Islam, and especially Islamic fundamentalists, many remain ignorant about its basic tenets.

The author of *Muhammad and the Rise of Islam*, Subhash Inamdar, reminds us that Islam is followed by more than a billion people around the globe. It is going through a revival (Lewis, 1990; Sivan, 1985) and it has posed new international challenges. This is one of the reasons for the Inamdar's study. He takes us back to the beginning of Islam and Muhammad's creation of a mental representation of a world that is now shared by so many persons. To understand Islam, one has to start with this shared mental representation so that present-day interpretation of and perceived threats against various versions of Islam and the reactions to such threats can be better understood and appreciated. Inamdar has provided us with an essential “textbook” that should be read by anyone as

the necessary initial introduction to the vast subject of Islam. The book does not summarize but examines in depth the fundamental beliefs of Islam or what it is to be a Moslem. Islam, like Christianity, has various versions. Inamdar examines Islam's links to Judaism and Christianity during Muhammad's lifetime as well as its separation from them and transformation into "a culture and basis of a distinct civilization" (p. ix) on its own.

What is unique about Inamdar's book is his combination of psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives in the understanding of the mental representation of historical events and Muhammad's role in shaping them. This book indeed is two books in one. The first provides the reader with a review of basic psychoanalytic and sociological theories of group formation. The author's review of psychoanalytic theories is limited in its scope. It covers references to Le Bon, and of course, Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson. Inamdar, however, does not include contemporary psychoanalysts' work on groups, the impact of object-relations theories, nor does he explore the details of theoretical differences in the formation of smaller groups and large groups made of thousands and millions of people (Volkan, 1997). It appears that this section of the book is written to introduce the lay-reader to some basic psychoanalytic conceptualizations of group formation. It is the second part of the book that directly deals with the beginnings of Islam where Inamdar provides an extensive and systematic study how *umma*, a group identity based on Islam, was formed in the early seventh century in Arabia. The pre-Islamic Arabian world consisted of small groups of clans and tribes. Muhammad provided the basic needs of his *umma*, changed the simple forms of tribal life in a short span of slightly more than two decades, established a more patrilineal culture; created new shared mental structures, rules of law and justice, and the concept of *jihad*; and laid the foundations for future Islamic successes.

Inamdar states that his work on Muhammad's life is not a psychobiography; rather it is a study of how Muhammad created a new large-group identity. Nevertheless, there are so many stories about the personal life of Muhammad—mostly available to the author through the ancient Arabic historians Ibu Ishaq (d. circa 761 A.D.) and Al-Tabiri (d. circa 923 A.D.). The author describes the Prophet's personality organization as well as his intrapsychic motivations of his many activities, his sexual and aggressive expressions. The psychodynamic forces at work within Muhammad are rightly connected with his orphanhood within Arabian culture and his marriage at age 25 to a 40-year-old woman, most likely in search of "good" mothering. Muhammad remained faithful to her and only after her death did he have multiple wives. Unlike Jesus, Muhammad was just a human who was the messenger of God and was permitted to receive natural pleasures of life.

Of course, writing any sophisticated psychobiography requires availability of enough data that illustrates the subject's repeated or consequential thinking and behavior patterns that can be explained with the psychoanalytic theories of mental development and that can be substitutes for transference manifestations we know so well in our clinical work. Muhammad's conflicts with his own wishes, his search for "good" mothering and male figures to identify with, his activities in forming his own identity, his repeated struggles—including wars—with people in his environment while providing leadership to his followers came from a chain of authorities in the form of, "I heard from ... who heard from ... who heard from ... who heard the prophet says ..." (p. 101). Nevertheless, Inamdar succeeds in providing the continuous history of the Muhammad that avails itself to psychological interpretations.

I do not intend here to summarize Muhammad's fascinating life story. Instead I will focus on some aspects of him and his actions that may have reverberations in today's world events. Muhammad combined his religious activities with military ones. He was a man of the sword. Significant contributions to battle planning and conducting propaganda are included in his legacy. In his lifetime, the tribal practice of *razzias*, raiding of "enemy" caravans which usually did not bring fatality, were turned into *jihad* to fight for *umma* in order to bring economic gains for Muhammad's followers. Of course, unlike *razzias*, *jihad* was deadly. Muhammad exhorted his men during wars

with the promise, from God, that those who were slain would go to a heavenly paradise; they in a sense would never die but would achieve symbolic immortality: “It was the promise of martyrdom and paradise that was probably the most potent factor that Muhammad brought to the annals of warfare” (p. 221). He devised battle cries that may be seen, I believe, as the first examples of modern political propaganda directed to one’s own people. After the Prophet’s death, other Moslem powers, Arabs and then Ottomans, used the same “propaganda” in forming vast empires. As Islam developed, it included most “democratic” principles in dealing with Jewish and Christian populations, who are accepted as people of the “book.” Nevertheless, even today, under stress and when regressive forces are in operation within some Islamic groups, martyrdom and the promise of paradise play a key role in training those who are willing to be killed physically—for example, suicide bombing and keeping the concept of the holy war alive.

Inamdar’s book provides details of the links between Islam and Judaism— Muhammad’s alliances with the Jews and his turning against them as Islam developed. The mental representations of these events were “melted” in the long run into such Koranic concepts as the dignity of the individual, freedom of conscience, and religious tolerance. These concepts were especially put into practice during the period between the eight and fifteenth centuries A.C.E. in Muslim Spain where Muslims, Jews, and Christians created a major civilization. Also, during the heyday of the Ottoman Empire the same principles were practiced. In the contemporary revival of Islam, among those who become fundamentalist and in my view are subjected to group regression, there are areas where the Koranic “democratic” principles are by-passed, and where the mental images early Islam’s struggles with others, especially Jews, are rekindled. A psychological understanding of the history of how Islam was founded, therefore, is a most valuable tool in understanding misperceptions between Islamic parties and others in conflict at the present time. Inamdar’s book is not only a lucid description of one man’s (Muhammad’s) fascinating life and the historical events surrounding him, but it is also a timely piece of significant work for anyone searching to understand details of the shared mental representation of a culture and civilization that may not be like theirs.

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