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Denigrating Terrorists as Cowards

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In recent years, political leaders have often characterized a suicide bombing by terrorists as a "cowardly" act. President George W. Bush used that term in his initial remarks after the September 11, 2001, kamikaze attacks. Many derogatory adjectives are applicable to that act, such as "fanatical," "callous," "destructive," "sociopathic," and "suicidal." A dictionary definition of "coward" is "one easily or excessively frightened by something recognized as dangerous, difficult, or painful." A terrorist who carefully plans the sacrifice of his life is not a coward.

The characterization of terrorists as "cowardly" appears to me to be an example of the Freudian defense mechanism of projection. It reflects the human capability of reinforcing our denial of a trait we dislike within by projecting it onto another person. A suicide bombing leaves people frightened of future acts of lethal violence. The drastic decrease in air travel following the tragedy of September 11 is an expression of fear. Ordinary people, most especially political leaders, are strongly motivated to deny their cowardly feelings. The label of "cowardly" applied to the action by the dead terrorists therefore helps us to deny our own cowardly feelings.

Almost 50 years ago, when I was a graduate student in psychology at Yale University, we were trained to identify projection as a potentially pathological defense mechanism. The projection of "cowardly" onto a terrorist action limits our ability to understand the terrorists. I recommend the use of empathy instead of trying to separate terrorists from our own humanity by the use of projection. Empathy is an adaptive human capability, enabling people to place themselves imaginatively into the thoughts and feelings of another person. Empathy for terrorists recognizes their fanatic beliefs, anger, childishly destructive wishes, and projection of unacceptable feelings onto an enemy who is perceived to be evil. Using empathy, rather than joining the terrorists in splitting the world into good and evil, enlarges our ability to understand and respond to them.

Projection, which denies one's own feelings, also creates a distorted perception of the object of projection. Responses by the United States government to the terrorist actions have included attempts to frighten terrorists. The terrorists are described as vainly trying to hide. Nations that cooperate with them are warned that they will share their fate. Such threats incline to strengthen the anger and determination of the terrorists, unless matched by resolute actions. I hope U.S. actions in Afghanistan have discouraged, rather than encouraged, future acts of terrorism.

The terrorists regard themselves as being at war against the "Great Satan," projecting onto the United States their rejected feelings about themselves. It does not help for the United States to react by declaring war on the terrorists and on everybody who cooperates with them because there are so many supporters of terrorism in the world, including at times, the U.S. Instead, the war should be targeted strictly against the terrorists. A limited scope of the war will isolate the terrorists, minimizing their recruitment of others and demonstrating the falsity of their projected perception of the United States as the "Great Satan."

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A Window to the Middle East

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Each fall, I teach a course in the psychology of religion. We review psychological theory and research relevant to understanding religious belief and behavior, with one important goal being that students apply their knowledge to the events they have experienced and the people they have known. To this end, I invite guest speakers from a wide variety of faith traditions, who describe their personal encounters with religion.

One of our guests is an Egyptian-born man in his mid-70s. He is well educated, a British-trained M.D. who then earned his Doctorate of Public Health in the U.S. For several years, he has come to my class to discuss Islam. He usually be-

gins his presentation with an eloquent description of historical events -- how Islam comes from the monotheistic tradition and shares much with Christianity and Judaism. The golden age of Islam represents the height of cultural ideals, he tells the class. He recommends that students read Arnold Toynbee's *Experiences* (1969) in order to gain a better appreciation of how Islam fits into history and to better understand his region of the world. Next, he discusses the beliefs of his religion. The *Koran* was delivered directly to Muhammad, making it a perfect reflection of God's will. The Five Pillars of Islam -- declaring that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is his messenger; daily prayers; giving alms; the month-long fast of Ramadan; and the *hajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca] -- form the core of the faith. He often demonstrates how Muslims pray and describes the meanings of the actions and words that constitute prayer. Students react positively to his presentations and leave the class better informed about Islam and about the meaning of Islam in one man's personal experience.

This year, he visited my class six days after the September 11 terrorist attacks. He came with a different quality of intensity and his presentation did not follow the usual pattern. Step-by-step, he led students through the logic of what it is like to live in the Middle East, to be bullied by larger countries, and to be valued only for one's oil or strategic location relative to oil reserves. He appealed to the students, saying that *might* should not triumph over *right*. He focused so intently and passionately on this message, on the history of injustice, that he rushed through the presentation of the core elements of Islam, even neglecting to mention the *hajj* as one of the Five Pillars. His message was timely and informative, transformed from one of religion and experience to one of history and religion and politics. As before, the students reacted positively to his presentation.

I soon came to learn that the passion he demonstrated in class is only a dim shadow of his full feelings in the wake of September 11. Three days after visiting my class, he participated in a panel discussion with a Jew, a Roman Catholic, and a Southern Baptist. I served as moderator of the panel. The theme of the discussion, religious reactions to the terrorist attack, was addressed first by the Catholic, followed by the Jew, and then the Baptist. For five minutes each, they spoke of tragedy, of "just war," of personal loss, and of justice. They did not claim to understand the attack, nor did they blame Islam, God, or broad groups of people. They merely expressed their anguish and their hope for justice.

When it was his turn to speak, my Muslim friend began with a verse from the *Koran*, and used it to decry terrorist acts. Very quickly, however, his reaction transformed into one of fury, as though he had been accused of being an accomplice to the attack. For 15 minutes he raged against the West, for its greed and imperialism, for its ignorance of Israeli atrocities, for its support of dictatorships rather than democracies. Only with great effort on my part did the panel regain its focus and did the audience begin to ask questions of the guests. At that point, my friend joined with the other panelists to denounce the attack and described why the vast majority of Muslims do not view the attackers' actions as being in accord with Islam. Finally, as the discussion ended he apologized for being so passionate and asked the audience to understand that these issues burn deep within his heart, within the heart of everyone who lives in the Middle East.

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What's Osama bin Laden Doing on My Office Door?

Sam A. Mustafa
Ramapo College of New Jersey

I am anybody's picture of a white man with medium brown hair and green eyes. I have no facial hair, dress inconspicuously, and speak with a middle-American accent. I am also a first-generation Arab-American from a mixed Muslim-Christian family. Because of my ordinary appearance and obvious Americanisms, people have often forgotten themselves in my presence. Over the years friends and co-workers have indulged in racist, slang in front of me, calling Arabs "sand-niggers" and "rag-heads." On many occasions, if I protested, they would squint curiously and say, "But you don't *look*… you know," as if they would have chosen their words more carefully, had I only made a better effort to fit their stereotypes. Jewish and Christian friends who have known me and my family for years will nonetheless assert that Arabs and Muslims are simply bad people, even while sitting at my dinner table, apparently in no fear of