

Liberal Religion and the War in Afghanistan

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May 23, 2010

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In the history of the Pashtun people the Servants of God are legendary. On April 23, 1930, a progressive Islamic leader named Badshah Khan was arrested after giving a speech urging resistance to the British occupation. After other Servants of God leaders were arrested, a large crowd gathered at the story-tellers marketplace in the city of Peshawar. As British troops moved into the bazaar, the crowd was loud, though completely nonviolent. British armored cars drove into the square at high speed, killing several people. The crowd continued their commitment to nonviolence, offering to disperse if they could gather their dead and injured, and if British troops left the square. The British troops refused to leave, so the protesters remained with the dead and injured. At that point, the British ordered troops to open fire with machine guns. The Servants of God members willingly faced bullets, responding without violence. Instead, many members repeated "God is Great" and clutched the Qur'an as they went to their death. One British Indian Army regiment refused to fire at the crowds. The entire platoon was arrested and many received heavy penalties, including life imprisonment.

What does this story from 80 years ago have to do with the war in Afghanistan today? Well, the Pashtun people make up 42 percent of the population of Afghanistan and 15 percent in Pakistan. Today almost all the Taliban are members of the Pashtun ethnic group. Of the roughly 42 million Pashtun, an estimated 30,000 of them are Taliban. In other words, our nation is at war with a small number of Pashtun.

I think it is important for us to know that the Pashtun people have a recent history of courageous nonviolent political action rooted in their Islamic faith. Within the last century one hundred thousand Pashtun people were followers of a progressive wise man they called by the honorary title "Badshah Khan," which means the "King of Chiefs." I want to tell you a little about him this morning.

Badshah Khan was born in 1890 in the Peshawar Valley, the son of a farming family. He did well in school and was offered a job as a Pashtun soldier serving the British occupation. He refused because he had come to believe that the highest spiritual act and worship is the "service of humanity."

Following this belief, in 1910, at the age of 20, Badshah Khan opened his first school to educate the Pashtun people. At that time Pashtun society was colonized, stagnant, violent, worn down by feuds, inequalities, factionalism, poor social cooperation, and plain ignorance. Education opportunities were limited. Some conservative religious leaders told parents that if their children went to school, they would go to hell. Badshah Khan stated that "the real purpose of this propaganda" was to keep Pashtuns "illiterate and uneducated." He organized 500 schools. In 1921 he established The Society for Reformation of Afghans to encourage education, eliminate blood feuds, and end prostitution among the Pashtun.

During the 1920s Badshah Khan's goal came to be independence from the British occupation. In 1929 he created a new organization that he called the Servants of God. Like the Taliban today, the Servants of God was made up of Islamic Pashtun people. Khan drew his recruits from the young men who had graduated from his schools. They traveled into various villages to seek recruits, wearing brick-red shirts, giving the movement the name the Red Shirts. Eventually the Servants of God grew to one hundred thousand members.

However, unlike the Taliban, Badshah founded the Servants of God on the belief in the power of active nonviolence. He told the Pashtun people:

I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet Mohammad, but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it.

To run this organization Badshah Khan set up a network of committees called jir-gas, named and modeled after the traditional tribal councils. Volunteers who took the oath of nonviolent action formed platoons with commanding officers and learned basic army discipline. The men wore red uniforms and the women black. They had drills, badges, a flag, the entire military hierarchy of rank, and even a drum and bagpipe band. It was the world's first nonviolent army.

The massacre at the Storytellers Market in Peshawar in 1930 was a defining moment in the non-violent struggle to drive the British out of India. Some estimates put the death toll from the shooting at nearly 400 dead. This gunning down of unarmed people triggered protests across the subcontinent. Through strikes, political organization and nonviolent opposition, the Servants of God came to dominate the politics of the North-West Frontier Province of India.

However, unlike the Taliban today, Badshah Khan's goal was an independent nation where everyone would have the right to practice their religion without interference. To Badshah Khan the concept of nations based on religion was absurd and repugnant. He believed that Indian independence had room for all religions -- Muslims, Sikh, Parsee, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu.

So when independence finally came in 1947, Badshah Khan sided with his Hindu friend Gandhi and opposed the partition of India. Khan and Gandhi lost the debate. Hindus and the Islamic leaders divided India into two countries. After Pakistan's independence, the Muslim League, wanting to control the opposition, banned the Servants of God and placed Badshah Khan under house arrest. Still, his progressive ideas remain part of the history of the Pashtun people.

I wanted to tell you the story of Badshah Khan today to show that religious nonviolence can take root in Islam, a fact that is easily lost as we continue in the ninth year of a war in Afghanistan. It also illustrates that there have been wise, strong, progressive, peaceful leaders among the Pashtun.

How does all this apply to the war in Afghanistan today? I am not an expert on Afghanistan. I have never been to the country. All I know is what I read and hear. Based on my limited

knowledge, my best guess is that the solution to the problem of instability in Afghanistan is not more soldiers, it is more well-trained police. My own religious principles ground me in a belief in non violence. However, I do believe that human societies need police and sometimes it is necessary for police to use violence. I believe that some people are dangerous to others and they need to be kept in a humane, but secure, prison.

The goals of policing are different from the goals of war. The goal of a war is to defend or to gain political control of a land area. This is what the Army, Navy, and Air Force are trained to do.

On the other hand, the goal of police work is to maintain social order by punishing those who do not follow the rules of society. Police are trained to investigate and to arrest criminals. Based on what I read in the newspaper, police work is what the Afghan people need.

Consider two front page news stories in the *Post* just this past week.

A District police chief woke to a cell phone call after 1 a.m. on Friday. There was gunfire at a local man's home. The police chief put on his uniform, sent two police trucks ahead and followed in a third.

"I thought that the Taliban must have attacked this man's house," he said.

He was wrong. It was a raid by U.S. Special Operations forces and their Afghan colleagues, and it left at least nine Afghan men dead. NATO describes it as a successful mission that took out ruthless Taliban insurgents. Relatives at the house said it was a slaughter of civilians.

Each time our military carries out such raids we create more people who hate us.

Yesterday in the *Post* this story appeared:

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- The Wolesi family was everything the American military cannot afford to lose.

The father was a devoted civil servant. The mother taught sewing classes for the United Nations. The eldest son, Jawed Ahmad, worked as an interpreter at the NATO base.

But with a dozen bullets last month, the Taliban won the battle for the Wolesi family. Ahmad's father was executed in the street. His mother quit her job. Ahmad dropped out of college and does not want to leave the house. Or open his mouth: "When my father passed away, I lost my English," he said in Pashto.

The story goes on to give several more examples like this.

In the lead story on the front page of the *Post* today a reporter writes that, although the population of Kandahar and the surrounding area is two million, there are only 780 police in Kandahar city and the surrounding area. Of the 87 slots for local judges, only nine are filled. Saraposa prison, the main detention facility, Kandahar, is overpopulated and is considered less than secure.

I am no expert, but the problems of Afghanistan appear to be a police problem, not a military problem. Afghan people need to feel ownership of their own legal system, not feel that it has been imposed on them by the United States. Imagine how we would feel if a non-Christian power, say the Egyptians or the Chinese, were to occupy Bethesda and train our police and our judges. It is likely that we would be reluctant to cooperate with these police and judges.

An Afghan legal system will not necessarily be based on the principles of Taliban. The story of the life of the nonviolent Muslim leader Badshah Khan shows that the Afghan people do have the ability to create their own progressive society. There is a wonderful tradition of liberal religion in Pashtun Islam. However, just as in the United States it is not always easy to be a religious liberal, it is not easy to be a religious liberal in Afghanistan or Pakistan. We will be no more successful imposing our values on Afghanistan with military force than we would be if we organized an army in Maryland to march on the Texas school board. Progressive change takes generations of patient education and persuasion.

After the partition of Pakistan and India, because the leaders of Pakistan thought he was a threat, Badshah Khan spent most of the rest of his life under house arrest. In 1962, Khan was named an Amnesty International Prisoner of the Year. For a time he was exiled in Kabul but then returned to house arrest in Pakistan. In 1988, at the age of 98, Badshah Khan died in Peshawar while still under house arrest. At his request he was buried in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. This was a symbolic move by Badshah Khan, representing his dream of the unification of the Pashtun people who live in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although he had been repeatedly imprisoned and persecuted, tens of thousands of mourners attended his funeral, marching through the historic Khyber Pass from Peshawar to Jalalabad. In his honor during the funeral a cease-fire was announced in the Afghan Civil War.

As we can see from the story of Badshah Khan, the Pashtun people have a recent history of liberal humanistic Islamic values. Today most Pashtun do not subscribe to the fanatic religious zealotry of the Taliban. Instead, many Pashtun gain a feeling of pride, positive self-esteem, and confidence from recalling and celebrating the life of Badshah Khan. I pray that some day they will be able to live in a country free of fear, a country with equality for all. I stand with the lovers of humanity like Badshah Khan -- visionaries, often unpopular, crying in the wilderness -- yet constantly engaged in the struggle for a new and better world.

Source: Easwaran, Eknath, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Kahn*, Nilgiri Press, Tomales, California, © 1984, 1999.

A movie "The Frontier Gandhi: Badshah Khan, a Torch for Peace" was released in 2008, and is scheduled to be released in DVD format in 2010.