Can the West avoid a `holy war' with Islam?

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The frightful prospect of a religious war lasting many years is arising from the Allied military intervention in Afghanistan in pursuit of Osama bin Laden's terrorists.

Muslim religious authorities insist that nothing in Islam justifies surprise, terrorist attacks on innocent civilians as occurred in the United States. But the Taliban and other militant Islamic groups, instead of denouncing this terrorism, have sounded the drums of `holy war' or *jihad*.

The United States and its allies need to move cautiously lest they inflame religious fundamentalism and draw thousands of new recruits to the terrorist ranks. Decisions taken now could determine whether or not we will face a terrorist onslaught lasting for generations, with the nightmare threat of mass destruction from atomic, biological or chemical weapons.

Religious wars in the past have exacted an enormous toll in human suffering because they are fought with such ferocity, and can abandon the restraints of military and political calculation, exalting death for one's god.

Paradoxically, even atheists can worship their martial gods, as did the Stalinists, who decked out their deities in the disguise of Marxism-Leninism. In Arthur Koestler's memorable phrase, this god failed, to the immense relief of the West.

The recent terrorist attacks not only exposed the complacency of the West, but revealed how vulnerable were its core economic and political institutions to assault with relatively unsophisticated weapons.

The West is hopefully now more aware how deeply many Muslims feel about their earlier humiliation by western colonialism, and the recent setbacks to their economic and social development.

The terrorist attacks have heightened western fears about Muslims and deeply reinforced caricatured views about Islam. Many westerners assume that Islam is a curious survival from the past that will disappear with modernisation. But instead we are witnessing a resurgence of Islam and it may yet provide the cultural foundation for a new flourishing of Muslim societies.

It would be well for leaders in the Western world to remember how deeply entrenched in its own history has been the `holy war' mentality. Not only did the crusaders march off to make war on the Muslims at the command of the Pope and in the name of God, but even after the crusades in Palestine failed, they dragged on elsewhere for hundreds of years, even influencing the attitudes of the conquistadors in the New World and the colonial carve-up of much of the world.

The Roman Catholic Church now recognises that the crusade mentality was a tragic mistake with devastating consequences for many millions of people. It is even more astonishing when we consider that for centuries the early Church strongly prohibited killing even in self-defence.

The Church struggled for centuries to tame the warrior cultures of the Germanic tribes that prized nothing more than honour and glory won in battle. The failure satisfactorily to curb this martial spirit is evident even from the history of the last two centuries, with its record of bloody colonial conquests, two world wars and innumerable other conflicts.

Unfortunately, the West still has not purged itself of all aspects of the crusade or `holy war' rhetoric. President Bush's unhappy slip, calling for a `crusade' against terrorists and their state supporters, in terms of a straight-out contest between `good' and `evil', played straight into the hands of Islamic extremists.

His calling the anti-terrorist campaign `Operation Infinite Justice' was also provocative, but such overblown and presumptuous rhetoric was abandoned as it was offensive to religious believers, and not just Muslims.

Instead of declaring this a `war' against terrorists, would it not be better to use the more restrained word, `campaign'? Indeed, why not speak of a `police action' sufficient to bring to justice the perpetrators and their accomplices? Killing bin Laden may only make him a martyr in the eyes of many, instead of him being recognised as a mass murderer whom all Muslims should denounce.

Christian religious leaders, most notably Pope John Paul II, have repeatedly appealed for greater understanding between Christianity and Islam, insisting that wars must never again be fought in the name of religion.

As the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, wrote of the crusade mentality during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, it was blasphemous to kill in the name of Christ or religion. He argued it was bad enough to kill in a just war, but Christians were obliged to remove any religious element from military conflict.

Over time the Church and civil society developed the just-war tradition which established rational criteria for the morality of war, and excluded any direct appeal to religion.

However, the Muslim view on `holy war' is more problematic. Though Muhammad at first urged peace and religious toleration on his followers, in response to attacks he justified military defence, and later wars of aggression. Yet even in its expansionary militant phase, Islam was to leave Christians and Jews in peace and protect them, as all worshipped the same God.

The West and Islamic countries urgently need to overcome their mutual isolation to understand each other better, especially by cooperating to raise living standards, improve education and health care, spread democracy and enhance human rights.