



1. Afghan postal stamp showing the Bamiyan Buddhas.

(Un)making Idolatry

From Mecca to Bamiyan

I ask the Afghans and the Muslims of the world: Would you rather be the smashers of idols or the sellers of idols?

Mullah Umar, supreme leader of Taliban

It is not those who forget, but those who "remember" the past that are condemned to repeat it.

Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India"

On February 26, 2001, Mullah Umar, the Supreme Leader of the Taliban militia ruling most of Afghanistan, ordered the destruction of all statues in areas under Taliban control. Starting on March 2, the Taliban embarked on an extended campaign using dynamite, anti-aircraft guns, and other heavy weapons to destroy the two best-known pre-Islamic relics in the country, the Buddha statues of Bamiyan. Their construction began in the second century CE under the Buddhist king Kanishka and was probably completed in the fifth century CE. The taller, at 55 meters (175 feet), is believed to have been the largest statue of the Buddha in the world; the smaller statue, at 38 meters (115 feet) tall, also ranked among the largest surviving images of the Buddha. Through a thousand years of Muslim rule they had suffered only sporadic, isolated attempts at their destruction by particularly zealous iconoclasts. More recently, they had been viewed as the centerpiece of Afghanistan's (albeit small) tourist industry and were promoted as a symbol of the country's long heritage, appearing on postage stamps and state-produced cultural publications before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The obliteration of the Bamiyan Buddhas was accompanied by the destruction of most, if not all, of the Buddhist figural art left in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan after two decades of looting and bombing in the war against the Soviet Union and the subsequent civil war. The six-week-long saga, beginning on February 12, 2001, with the announcement of the planned destruction of the Buddhas and ending shortly after the confirmation of their destruction on March 26, unfolded amid a massive international campaign to save the statues. Their destruction was widely condemned in the Western world, in countries with Buddhist and Hindu populations, as well as in Islamic countries such as Afghanistan's neighbors

Iran and Pakistan. Criticism of the Taliban by all parties, East and West, consisted of their vilification as intransigent philistines who were utterly intolerant of other religions and of the concepts of art, history, and world heritage.

This paper will attempt to contextualize the Taliban's actions by taking a close look at their statements and behavior as the events unfolded in February and March of 2001. It argues that the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas was neither part of a preconceived plan based in an uncompromising and anachronistic view of Islam, nor was it a petulant political reaction to their rejection and isolation by the world community. On the contrary, throughout the weeks in question, the Taliban leadership was sensitive to both international and local public opinion; the discursive process surrounding their pronouncements concerning the Buddhas and others' reactions to them played a large part in shaping the Taliban's self-understanding.

Much has been written on Muslim attitudes toward idolatry. Finbarr Barry Flood has written an interesting article historicizing the Taliban's acts in an Islamic context in an attempt to show that their sort of iconoclasm is an aberration and not part of a universal Muslim attitude toward idols and images.¹ Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity a two-faceted distrust of visual and physical representation. On one side is the preference for the nonphysical over the physical, thought over matter, that pervades the philosophy of late antiquity and to which Islamic philosophical thinking is a direct heir. On the other is the scriptural prohibition against figural imagery. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that there is no clear Islamic condemnation paralleling the Biblical ban of the second commandment. Qur'anic condemnations are nowhere as explicit, perhaps the clearest being, "And Abraham said to his father Azar: Do you take idols (*asniiman*) as Gods? Indeed I see you and your people in a manifest error" (6:74). The ambivalence of Islamic attitudes toward idolatry and iconoclasm is evident in the following accounts of Muslim encounters with idols. Two are from the South Asian context and one from the formative period of Islam.

In September 1528, Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire in India, came to the town of Urwahi in Gwalior. His memoirs describe the incident as follows:

Urwahi is surrounded on three sides by a single mountain, the stone of which is not so red as that of Bayana but somewhat paler. The solid rock outcroppings around Urwahi have been hewn into idols, large and small. On the southern side is a large idol, approximately twenty yards tall. They are shown stark naked with all their pri-

vate parts exposed. Around the two large reservoirs inside Urwahi have been dug twenty to twenty-five wells, from which water is drawn to irrigate the vegetation, flowers, and trees planted there. Urwahi is not a bad place. In fact, it is rather nice. Its one drawback was the idols, so I ordered them destroyed.²

The second example is from a description of the Indus valley (Al-Sind) by the renowned tenth-century Arab Muslim geographer al-Muqaddasi:

As for the idols in this region, there are two in Harawa made of stone: no one approaches them. They have a power such that should a man try to lay his hand on one, it will be held back and will not reach the idol. They both appear as though made of gold and silver. It is said that if one expresses a wish in their presence, the request will be granted The two statues are quite enchanting. I saw a Muslim man who said he had forsaken Islam to return to the worship of the idols, having been captivated by them; when he returned to Naysabur [in Iran] he became Muslim again. The two idols really are miraculous!³

The final example is a popular account in a work by Ibn al-Kalbi, entitled *The Book of Idols*, of the destruction of al-'Uzza, a deity mentioned in the Qur'an. According to Ibn al-Kalbi, sometime around 630 C.E. Muhammad commanded his military champion Khalid ibn Walid to the valley of Nakhlah where there were three trees inhabited by the goddess al-'Uzza, and ordered him to cut down the first one. When Khalid reported back, Muhammad asked him if he had seen anything unusual there, to which Khalid ibn Walid replied that he had not. Khalid's return to cut down the second tree was similarly uneventful. When he returned to cut down the third tree, he encountered an Abyssinian woman with wild hair, gnashing and grating her teeth, accompanied by Dubayyah al-Sulami, the custodian of al-'Uzza. Dubayyah addressed the woman, calling her al-'Uzza and beseeching her to kill Khalid. The Muslim champion struck her with his sword, cutting off her head, at which she fell to the ground in a pile of ashes. He then killed her custodian, Dubayyah, felled the tree, and returned to Muhammad with his report. Muhammad allegedly commented: "That was al-'Uzza Verily she shall never be worshipped again."⁴

The implications of Ibn al-Kalbi's account of the killing of al-'Uzza are clear. Muhammad did not deny that al-'Uzza was *real*. She was not a mere tree that the ignorant pagan Arabs insisted on worshipping; Dubayyah, her custodian, did not try to stop Khalid ibn Walid himself but rather he beseeched the

goddess to defend herself (and, by extension, those who worshipped her); and it took one of the greatest champions of Islam to kill al-'Uzza, a feat that presumably could only be accomplished because it was the will of the superior deity of Muhammad and Khalid ibn Walid.

Al-Muqqadisi's description of the Indian temple is similar in its open acknowledgment of the power of the idol. Clearly, neither he nor Ibn al-Kalbi denied the existence of supernatural power resident in idols; they simply saw them as doctrinally illegitimate and inferior both morally and in power to Islam and Allah. In contrast, Babur's iconoclastic act ostensibly was motivated not by religion as much as aesthetics: the vulgar statues of Urwahi were a stain on an otherwise very pleasant place.

These varied examples notwithstanding, Islam has an undeniable iconoclastic ethos similar to that of Judaism and most of Christianity. The Qur'an situates Muslim monotheism squarely within a Biblical prophet tradition in which Abraham is the protomonotheist who rejects the false gods of his ancestors. There are many instances of Muslims destroying Hindu idols for the express purpose of eliminating idolatry or marking the victory of Islam, and some Central and South Asian Muslim rulers proudly bore the title of "idol-destroyer" (*but-shikan*).

The Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas must be seen within the context of Muslim historical memory in which intolerance of idols can easily, if erroneously, be seen as woven into mores of proper Muslim behavior, and iconoclasm - if not always viewed as laudable - is never a particularly condemnable act.

Newspaper Coverage

The Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas in February and March of 2001 coincided with one of the holiest periods in the lunar Islamic year, called the Hijri calendar, which is used in most Muslim societies including Afghanistan. The Hajj pilgrimage, a central ritual that ends on Eid al-adha, the holiest day of the Muslim year, fell on March 3-6. The timeline leading up to the destruction of the Buddhas is therefore critical to understanding the Taliban's actions. I have provided the major dates in the Gregorian calendar with the corresponding Hijri date in parentheses:

1996 (1417): Taliban conquered Kabul for the first time, making them de facto rulers of Afghanistan.

1998 (1419): A preliminary attack was made on the smaller Buddha during the Taliban occupation of Bamiyan.



2. The Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan, nineteenth-century view, looking northwest toward Buddha niches and monastic sanctuaries.

July 1999 (Rabi' al-awwal 1420): Supreme Leader of the Taliban, Mullah Umar, decreed protection for all non-Muslim relics, including the statues.

February 12, 2001 (19 Dhu'l-qa'da 1421): The BBC reported that Taliban representatives, invoking the Islamic prohibition against the depiction of living things, had destroyed over a dozen ancient statues in the Kabul National Museum .

February 26, 2001 (2 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): Mullah Umar announced that all statues in the Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan were to be destroyed.⁵ This was followed immediately by a statement issued through the Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef: "Afghanistan's religious scholars and the Supreme Court have unanimously issued the *fatwa* which [will] be implemented at all costs." The decree is to be carried out jointly by the Ministries of Information and Culture and of Fostering Virtue and Preventing Vice. ⁶

March 1, 2001 (5 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): It was widely reported that the Taliban had started using heavy weapons to destroy the statues.

March 2, 2001 (6 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press quoted Taliban sources as saying explosives were being brought to Bamiyan from other provinces and that all statues in Taliban-controlled areas were in the process of being demolished. India offered to take custody of the artifacts.?

March 5, 2001 (9 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421, the last day of the Hajj and eve of Eid al-adha): Mullah Umar defended his edicts, posing the rhetorical question: "I ask Afghans and the world's Muslims to use their sound wisdom do you prefer to be a smasher of idols or a seller of idols?"⁸

March 9, 2001 (13 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421, immediately after the Eid al-adha holiday): The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) confirmed that demolition work had resumed after having been suspended for a few days.⁹

March 11, 2001 (15 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): A joint UNESCO-OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference) delegation arrived in Pakistan to plead with the Taliban, led by Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Zaid al-Mahmud, accompanied by Shaikh Nasr Farid Wassel, Mufti of Al-Azhar (the most prestigious religious institution in the Sunni world), as well as by another Al-Azhar-based scholar, Shaikh Muhammad al-Rawi; they were to be joined by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the most popular preacher in the entire Arab world.

March 14, 2001 (18 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): Taliban expelled BBC reporter Kate Clark and closed Kabul office of BBC, accusing her of biased reporting and calling the Taliban "ignorant."

March 16, 2001 (20 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): The Afghan Foreign Minister, Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil, announced that the destruction was not completed because snowfall caused a work stoppage. He simultaneously announced that the Taliban would continue to provide sanctuary to Osama bin Laden.¹⁰

March 19, 2001 (23 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): Al-jazeera showed footage of the destruction. The Taliban sacrificed one hundred cows to atone for the delay in destroying the statues."

March 20, 2001 (24 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): The U.S. government rejected Taliban claims that the statues' destruction was justified by an alleged UNESCO offer of money to save the statues when no money was offered for the starving people of Afghanistan. It also insisted that sanctions against Afghanistan would stand until bin Laden was handed over.

March 22, 2001 (26 Dhu'l-hajjah 1421): journalists were taken on a tour of Afghanistan's national museum to see the results of the destruction there.

March 26, 2001 (1 Muharram 1422, New Year's Day in the Hijri calendar): Twenty journalists were flown to Bamiyan to see the destroyed statues.

November 11,2001 (24 Sha'ban 1422): The Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan town they retreated in front of the advancing local militia, Hizb-e islami.

Western popular coverage of Taliban statements and actions was almost uniformly condemnatory through this period, with few journalists or analysts attempting to make sense of what the Taliban were doing. Statements by Mullah Umar saying the statues would be destroyed because they "have been used as idols and deities by the non-believers Only Allah, Most High, deserves to be worshipped, not anyone or anything else," and his infamous comment, "We do not understand why everybody is so worried All we are breaking are stones"² were quoted in the Western media primarily as examples of the Taliban's incomprehensible irrationality. Their actions were universally treated in the Western press as out of keeping with the will of the Afghan people, and the BBC went so far as to declare that the "majority" of Afghans inside the country were "devastated" by the destruction of the Buddhas.³

Coverage of the Taliban's actions after the fact in scholarly publications showed a similar tone. In one of several articles dealing with the Bamiyan Buddhas published in *iconoclash*, Jean-Michel Frodon stated, "It is against that community and against a relationship with the world that values a non-religious relationship with the invisible, that the dynamite which destroyed the giant Buddhas was used."⁴ In another essay in the same collection, Jean-François Clement displayed no understanding of the nature of religious reformism when he mused about the implications the Taliban's behavior carried for their attitudes toward other Muslims and the future of Islam:

By destroying the Buddhas, the Taliban were clearly signaling that all [Muslims] who had preceded them in Afghanistan, who had respected the statues, were not real [Muslims]. In short, there had never been [Muslims] before them. But will there be any after them? In the decree ordering the destruction of all representations of living creatures, the Taliban declared that the Bamiyan Buddhas had to be destroyed because "Buddhism should return to Afghanistan." What strange [Muslims] were these who could foresee the impending disappearance of Islam.⁵

Significantly absent in the coverage of the events in Western-language publications is any indication that commentators had read the local press. The most remarkable

aspect of this oversight is that, to the best of my knowledge, not one scholar or journalist who has written about the events bothered to look at the Islamic Hijri calendar used in Afghanistan, a major omission since the calendar played a central role in the proceedings. Mullah Umar's initial declaration ordering the destruction was made on 2 Dhu'l-hajja, five days before the start of the Hajj pilgrimage and eight days before Eid al-adha. The lead-up to the pilgrimage is a time of heightened religious sensitivity across the Muslim world, as pilgrims prepare for their departure for Mecca while the rest of the community participates vicariously in this major ritual. Eid al-adha itself commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and is popularly understood as a reminder to all Muslims to be ready to sacrifice all that is dear to them at God's command. Mullah Umar's choice of occasion can hardly be considered accidental, since the other major act for which Abraham is remembered is his decision to break from the idolatry of his father and ancestors, an obvious precedent on which the Taliban modeled their decision to right the wrongs of their forefathers in Afghanistan and destroy idols that they openly acknowledged were part of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic heritage. It is in this light that the animal sacrifice on March 19 (23 Dhu'l-hajja) makes most sense.⁶

The calendar was a central factor not just in evoking religious memory as the Taliban cast themselves as moral heirs to Abraham but also in the very progression of events. Demolition work was suspended for Eid al-adha, and there appears to have been a brief lull during which Mullah Umar was directly responsive to opinion from the Western and Islamic worlds. However, the high-level delegation of Muslim clerics was prevented from being assembled until March 11 (15 Dhu'l-hajja) by the same holiday. The Taliban's responses to statements and proposals from the West, which seemed oblivious to the symbolism of what the Taliban saw themselves as doing, were clearly colored by the calendar. Significant among these was the offer of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, made through the United Nations, to pay for the removal of all moveable relics in Afghanistan. This offer came during the Hajj, at a time when the memory of Abraham could not be stronger, since both the Hajj and Eid al-adha commemorate events in Abraham's life, in particular his opposition to idols and his willingness to sacrifice his son for the sake of God. It is no wonder that such offers were widely reported in newspapers read by those sympathetic to the Taliban.

It is in the context of local opinion and media that the Taliban's actions come into clearest light. Given the almost complete absence of publishing in the Taliban's Afghanistan, their international isolation, strong ideological ties with religious

groups in Pakistan, and the pattern of reliance on Pakistani resources forced on many Afghans through two decades of war, the local press to which the Taliban reacted most directly was that of Pakistan.

The emotional links between the Taliban and some religious elements in Pakistani society are very deep.⁷ Most of the Taliban leadership was trained in Pakistani seminaries belonging to the Deobandi school of Sunni thought, a somewhat puritanical reform movement started in opposition to British colonial rule in India. Deobandi ideology, which teaches that a Muslim's primary loyalty is to the religion, not the nation-state, and actively encourages individuals to agitate for the political unification of the world's Muslim population, has a substantial and influential following in Pakistan. The majority of religious seminaries are run by Deobandis, and the political party associated with the school, the *Jam'at-e 'ulamiyye Islam* (henceforth jUI), has a disproportionate degree of influence in Pakistani politics. In many ways, the Taliban can be seen as the wayward children of the jUI, born in politicized seminaries and traumatized by the Afghan civil war. Large numbers of Pakistanis joined the Taliban and fought in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, and many more viewed the Taliban as ideologically admirable harbingers of a Muslim utopia. The Taliban, in turn, depended on Pakistan for education and military training, as well as economic and moral support. Though not always tractable in their decision making, there is no doubt that they were ever cognizant of the importance of Pakistani public opinion and shaped their policies to reflect that.

Very insightful work has been done concerning the difference between English and local-language media in India. In *Politics after Television*, Rajagopal demonstrates how the English-language media failed to see the growth of Hindu nationalism through the late 1980s and the 1990s. When the serialized *Ramayana* began in 1985, many found it significant only because it was the most-watched show in the country. The English-speaking self-proclaimed shapers and arbiters of public opinion were taken completely by surprise when this TV show became the fuel for the Ram Janam Bhoomi movement, which culminated in the destruction of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992.⁸ The destruction of this mosque was widely condemned by the Pakistani public and its memory played a significant role in the Taliban's rhetoric.

In Pakistan, the relationship of language to newspapers is somewhat different, in the sense that Urdu, Pakistan's national language, is pervasively used. Not only can Urdu-language publications be considered mainstream, but Urdu newspapers of record also follow the same journalistic

standards as English-language papers, unlike the other non-English press in India.

The English-language press in Pakistan echoed international opinion on the Taliban's behavior and was almost universally condemnatory. The *Pakistan Times*, one of the most widely read English papers, emphasized the following themes: (1) the need to preserve global heritage; (2) tolerance for other religions; (3) that Islam condemns destroying other people's places of worship; (4) in addition, that Islam mandates tolerance of other religions; (5) that these actions would make the world think Muslims were backward; and (6) that it would give justification to others to victimize Muslims and put Muslim historical sites and places of worship at risk. Through the period in question, only three letters in the *Pakistan Times* expressed ambivalence over the issue. They highlighted the hypocrisy of the international community's concern for dead stone in a country suffering a severe drought and a widening famine. None were supportive of the Taliban.⁹

In contrast, the Urdu press, read by the majority of Pakistan's population, published a much wider spectrum of opinion. The daily *Jang*, which is published by Pakistan's largest media group and employs a neutral reporting mode, provided extensive coverage of Taliban statements as well as reactions by Muslim clerics, some of whom supported the Taliban. It also displayed a much wider range of opinion in editorials and letters to the editor. The majority of letters to the editor in *Jang* brought up Western hypocrisy. Some specifically mentioned iconoclasm as a religious duty; complained of the lack of international concern when the Babri Mosque was destroyed a decade earlier, of an anti-Muslim bias in the West; and connected the sanctions on the drought-stricken people of Afghanistan to the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Palestinian Territories.

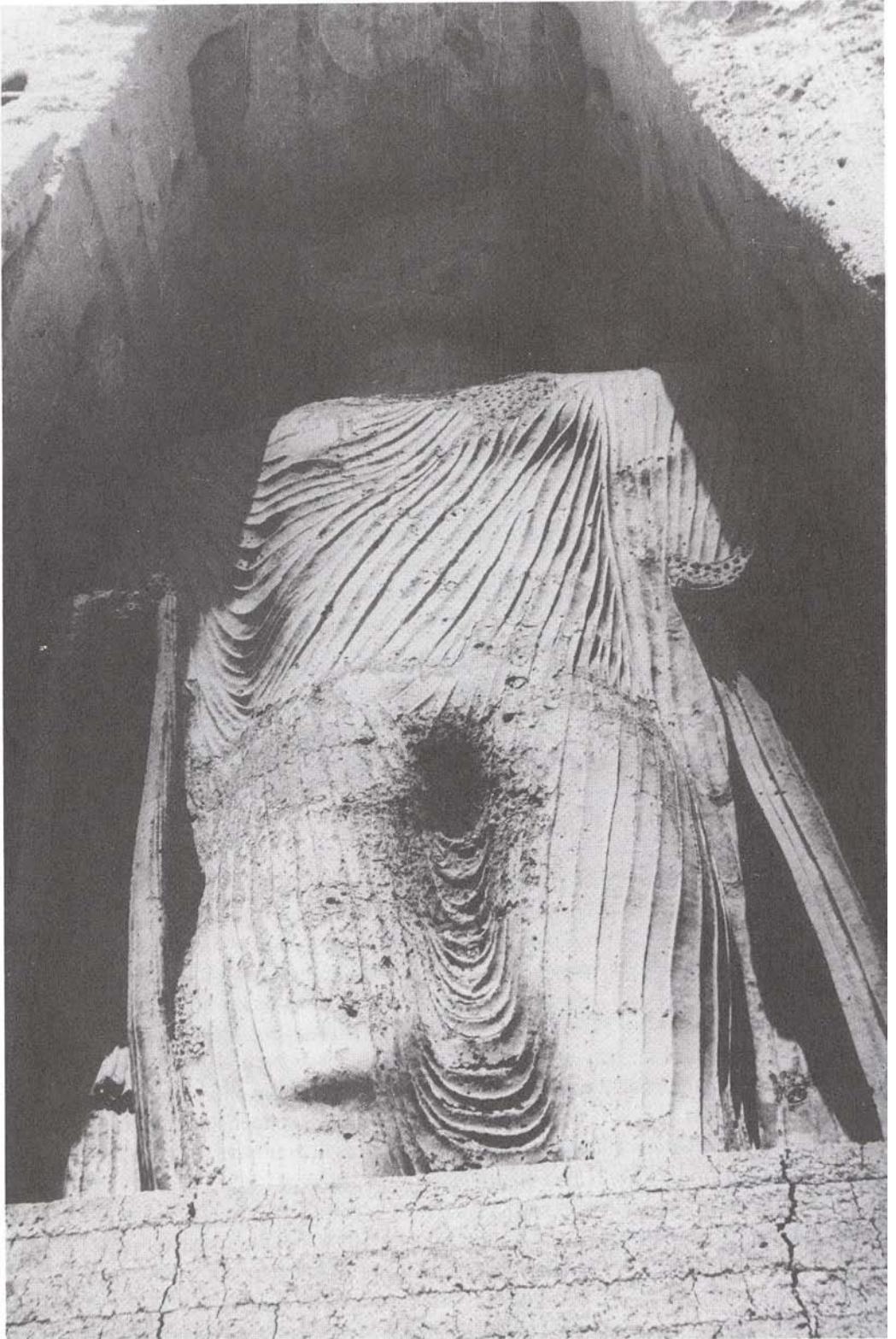
The Taliban's public statements should be seen in the context of Pakistan's Urdu press, where they seem the least irrational. Trying to justify the destruction of the statues, the Taliban and their sympathizers stressed four main points. In addition to the commonly made claim of the hypocrisy in concern over dead stone but not for living human beings, the Taliban and supporters argued that the statues were not objects of worship since there were no Buddhists in Afghanistan. As such, destroying them was not an act of desecration or persecution. Thus they pointed out that their actions were not out of line with Islamic injunctions to respect other religions, an accusation leveled against them from a number of quarters. Since no one worshipped the Buddhas, they were not covered by rules of protection that were extended to idols in Hindu

3. Nineteenth-century view of the taller Bamiyan Buddha, 55 meters (175 feet) tall, constructed second to fifth century CE



temples and homes in Afghanistan. (In fact, the Taliban reacted very strongly to accusations that the destruction of the Buddhas was symptomatic of their treatment of religious minorities.) In direct contradiction to these points were statements made by Taliban spokesmen as well as sympathetic Pakistani clerics saying that the Taliban's acts were payback for the destruction of the Babri Mosque at the hands of Hindu militants.²⁰ Finally, the religious argument was linked to the accusation of hypocrisy on the part of the international community: the very fact that money was offered to save the statues transformed them from artifacts into idols since they were now being venerated more than human lives, and this reverence necessitated their destruction.

When Mullah Umar rhetorically asked the Afghan people and Muslims all over the world if they would rather be the smashers of idols or the sellers of them, he was clearly referring back to Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, the Afghan iconoclast of myth and legend who sacked the Shiva temple at Somnath, Gujrat, in 1025 CE. The local priests and rulers



4. Nineteenth-century view of the smaller Bamiyan Buddha.

allegedly offered a treasure to ransom the main Shiva Linga icon, and Mahmud is legendary for having replied that he was a smasher of idols, not a seller of them.²¹ Mullah Umar was also referring to the prophet Abraham, who broke with the religion of his father Azar, a maker and seller of idols, and it was this latter claim that resonated in the popular press and was applauded by Taliban sympathizers. On March 2 (6 Dhu'l-hajja, the day before the Hajj starts), Abdul Akbar Chitrali, a provincial head of the *Jam'at-e ittihad-e 'ulama* (an organization supported by the jUi), declared that selling idols was wrong and congratulated the Taliban for reviving the "Tradition of Abraham" (*sunnat-e Ibrahim!*).²² The same sentiment was echoed at a high-level meeting of the jUi on the eve of Eid al-Adha, in which one prominent cleric, Hafiz Husayn Ahmad, made an explicit link between the timing of the Taliban's actions in the "month of sacrifice" and the tradition of Abraham. The head of the organization and then-leader of Pakistan's opposition, Maulana Fazlur Rahman, also applauded the Taliban and congratulated them for exposing Western hypocrisy.²³ The following week, other important members of the jUi gave wider legitimacy to the Taliban's actions by declaring that iconoclasm was the way of all prophets and that the Taliban had fulfilled "Prophetic Tradition" (*sunnat-e nabl*), an explicit reference to Muhammad.²⁴

Even moderate religious voices were not necessarily condemnatory of the Taliban's actions. On the day commemorating Abraham's sacrifice, Maulana Shah Ahmad Nurani, leader of the *Jam'at-e 'Ulama-ye Pakistan*, the World Islamic Mission, and a man long recognized for his moderate views, said that destroying the Buddhas was the right thing to do.²⁵

However, the overall tone of the most-respected Urdu paper was not supportive of the Taliban. The editorial on Eid al-adha (March 6, 2001) spoke at length about the nature of sacrifice in Abrahamic tradition but did not mention the Taliban or Afghanistan. A well-written essay on the editorial page of the same day pointed out the hypocrisy of the Taliban's concern with the "false gods" of dead stone at a time when the "false gods" of starvation, poverty, cruelty, sickness, unemployment, and ignorance were stronger every day, and for which no Mahmud of Ghazna seemed forthcoming.²⁶

Jang's coverage of the events contrasts with that of other Urdu dailies, which reflected a point of view more divergent from the attitude of the international community. The popular Lahore-based daily *Nawa-i waqt* was openly supportive of the Taliban; the Sunday magazine of its March 18 issue ran a full-page article comparing how the suffering of children failed to move the West, while earthen statues brought out their "humanity."

Conclusion

The destruction of the Buddhas illustrates the vast gap that exists in the values and priorities of different populations within South Asian societies. Those who condemned the destruction of statues on the grounds of preservation of global heritage, art, and religious tolerance, view the icon smashers as the standard-bearers of an archaic ideology completely out of place in modern society. The defenders of the act of destruction see the condemners as dupes and apologists of the West, deracinated and desacralized.

The important question is whether it would have been possible to save the Buddha statues. It is conceivable that, had international sanctions on Afghanistan been lifted and combined with nonsensationalistic diplomatic efforts, the Taliban might have been convinced to let another country take custody of the statues. But in light of the Taliban's human-rights record and their stance on the extradition of bin Laden, there was little chance of a more conciliatory international position.

It is critical to note that the Taliban did not approach the crisis of the Bamiyan Buddhas with a preconceived plan. Not only did their position change over the weeks in question but so did their self-conception and their reputation among their wider base of sympathizers. What started out as a vague iconoclastic impulse became sharply focused as a reenactment of prophetic tradition, the Abrahamic precedent being invoked not just in the iconoclastic act but also in the symbolism of sacrifice, since the deaths of children as a direct consequence of international sanctions evoked Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his child for his monotheistic God. Their understanding of Muslim doctrine concerning religious figural imagery evolved through their response to international offers to remove the artifacts or of screening them in such a way that passersby could not see them: not only did the Taliban come to see the statues' presence in Afghanistan as a threat, but they also came to fear that any willingness to allow the Buddhas to survive in another country would make themselves complicit in perpetuating idolatry. And finally, linking the Buddhas to the Babri Mosque recast the traditionally isolationist Taliban as part of an international Muslim movement, since the destruction of the mosque was important to Muslims in Pakistan and India but had little resonance in Afghanistan. Their internationalization was recognized when both Chechen separatists and Kashmiri militants expressed support for the Taliban's actions. In the end, their actions were seen as meeting with divine approval in the widely circulated reports of drought-ending rain immediately following the destruction of the statues.²⁷

The events of February and March 2001 confirmed the Taliban's status in the eyes of their supporters as pious champions of Islam against its international foes, just as it reaffirmed the view of the international community (and this includes the majority of Muslims) that the Taliban were intolerant, uneducated, and irrational. The current government of Afghanistan has declared rebuilding the Bamiyan Buddhas a cultural imperative, although it remains unclear when and how this will be carried out. One of the more ambitious schemes approved by the government is a proposal by the Japanese artist Hiro Yamagata to mount a sound-and-laser show that would project Buddha images at Bamiyan, powered by hundreds of windmills that would also supply electricity to surrounding residents. The cost is estimated at \$64 million.²⁸ Many people have questioned the ethics of spending large sums to make replica statues in a country where the overwhelming majority of the population lives without personal security or the basic necessities of life. The moral balance of human lives against inanimate artifacts faced with destruction is difficult to weigh-and the dilemma is no easier when considering their reconstruction.

Author Biography

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Endnotes

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the conference *Deus (e)X Historia: Exploring Divinity and Reason in the Production of Knowledge*, held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in April 2007.

¹Fin barr Barry Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 4 (December 2002): 641-59. Flood's essay also contains a very thoughtful discussion of questions of museumship and preservation as they pertain to the international attempt to preserve the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

²Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur Mirza, *Baburnama (Chaghatay Turkish Text with Abdul-Rahim Khankhanan's Persian Translation)*, ed. and trans. by W. M. Thackston Jr., *Sources of Oriental Languages and Literatures* 18 (Cambridge: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 1993), 3:728-29.

³Al-Muqaddasi, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions (Ahsan al-taqisim fi ma'rifat al-aqilim)*, trans. Basil Collins (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2001), 390.

⁴Ibn al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols (Kitab al-asnim)*, trans. N. Amin Faris (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 21-22. This version of the destruction of al-'Uzza is not found in the collections of Prophetic traditions (*hadith*) considered canonical by the majority of Muslims, but notions of canonicity have little bearing on the construction of sacred history, or on the impact such narratives have on attitudes toward art, objects, or much else. There is a large corpus of prophetic traditions that serve as the wisdom literature of Muslims, guiding attitudes and ethics in all walks of life.

⁵Detailed information on various reactions to this decree and other related events is available at the Archeological Institute of America's Web site, <http://www.archaeology.org/online/news/afghanistan/index.htm>.

⁶"Taliban to Implement Edict on the Destruction of Statues," *Pakistan Times*, February 28, 2001.

⁷"Taliban Assembling Explosives to Blow up Buddha Statues," *Pakistan Times*, March 3, 2001.

⁸ "Taliban Leader Defends Afghan Statue Destruction," *Pakistan Times* (Reuters), March 6, 2001.

⁹ "Taliban Resume Bamiyam Buddhas' Destruction," *Pakistan Times*, March 10, 2001.

¹⁰ "No Shift in Policy on Osama, Statues: Taliban," *Pakistan Times*, March 16, 2001.

¹¹ "Taliban Assure Protection to Historic Relics," *Pakistan Times*, March 20, 2001. Molly Moore, "Afghanistan's Antiquities under Assault," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Friday, March 2, 2001.

¹² "UN Condemns Taliban on Statues," *BBC News*, March 2, 2001: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1210927.stm. According to the report, the claim was made by the UN coordinator for Afghanistan.

¹³ Jean-Michel Frodon, "The War of Images, or the Bamiyan Paradox," in *iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. B. Latour and P. Weibel, 221-23 (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM and MIT Press, 2002), 222.

¹⁴ Jean-François Clement, "The Empty Niche of the Bamiyan Buddha," in *iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. B. Latour and P. Weibel, 218-20 (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM and MIT Press, 2002), 218.

¹⁵ The question of why the Taliban did not destroy the Buddhas earlier in their rule of Bamiyan remains unanswered. Their anger at having been internationally ostracized no doubt played a role. It is also likely that different factions within the Taliban disagreed on how artifacts from Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past should be treated, with Mullah Umar representing the tolerant end of the spectrum (evidenced by his declaration of protection in 1999) and hard-liners, such as Mullah Dadullah (killed in May 2007), insisting on their destruction from the beginning and eventually leaving Umar with no choice in the matter.

¹⁶ For an introduction to the Taliban and their relationship with the Pakistani government and society, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ A. Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also V. Naregal, *Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) and R. Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics, and the Indian-Language Press, 1977-99* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). The Babri Mosque, named after the aforementioned emperor Babur, commemorates the establishment of Mughal rule and is viewed with reverence by many South Asian Muslims.

¹⁸ The letters were: Barkatullah Marwat (Kuwait), March 15, 2001; A. Khan (Islamabad) March 28, 2001; Rohul Amin (Swat), March 30, 2001.

The United States of America imposed unilateral financial and economic sanctions on the Taliban on July 5, 1999, in an attempt to force them to stop providing sanctuary to Osama bin Laden. On October 15 of the same year the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1267, which imposed financial sanctions and a flight-ban on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan if it failed to turn bin Laden over to a competent authority within thirty days. These sanctions were strengthened in December 2000, despite an August 2000 report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) that the sanctions were having "tangible negative effect" on the population of Afghanistan ("Sanctions against Al Qaeda and the Taliban," *Global Policy Forum*: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/indexafg.htm>).

¹⁹ "Ye Babri Masjid ki shahadat ka radd-e 'amal he, Taliban" (This Is the Consequence of the Martyrdom of the Babri Mosque), *lang*, March 5, 2001.

²⁰ This statement has gained much popularity among Muslim admirers of Mahmud of Ghazna, although it does not accurately reflect his words as they appear in the historical work from which they are drawn. The chronicle *Tiirikh-i-firishhta* describes Mahmud as being concerned with the judgment of posterity and declaring his preference for being remembered as a destroyer of idols. See Muhammad Qasim Firishhta, *Tiirikh-e-firishhta*, 2 vols. (Lucknow, India: n.p., 1905), 1:33; English translation by John Briggs, *History of the Rise of the Mohammedan Power in India*, 4 vols. (1829; rpt. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), 1:43-44).

²¹ "Mullah 'Umar ne but-shikani ka hukm de kar sunnat-e Ibrahim ki zinda kiya" (Mullah Umar's Brings the Tradition of Abraham Back to Life by Ordering the Destruction of Idols), *lang*, March 2, 2001.

²² "Mullah 'Umar ki siyasat ne maghrib k6 hila kar rakh diya" (Mullah Umar's Strategy Leaves the West Shaken), *lang*, March 5, 2001.

²³ "Taliban ne but6n ko tor kar Nabi-ye Akram ki sunnat ada ki" (Taliban Fulfill the Tradition of the Noblest Prophet by Destroying Statues), *lang*, March 11, 2001.

⁵ "Afghanistan men but torne ka iqdam durust he" (Decision to Destroy Idols in Afghanistan Is Correct), *lang*, March 6, 2001.

⁶ Hasan Nisar, "But-shikani ka shawq" (Fondness for Iconoclasm), *lang*, March 6, 2001.

"But tute to Afghanistan men barish shuru' ho ga'i" (When the Idols Broke Rain Began Falling in Afghanistan), *Nawa-i waqt*, March 10, 2001.

⁸ Carlotta Gall, "Afghans Consider Rebuilding Bamiyan Buddhas," *International Herald Tribune*, December 5, 2006: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/12/05/news/buddhas.php?page=1>. For more on reconstruction plans, see "The Bamiyan Project": <http://www.photogrammetry.ethz.ch/research/bamiyan/buddha/index.html>.