Christians must understand Islam's use and abuse of *Jihad*

By Rob Phillips

RIDGECREST, N.C., April 8, 2003 (BP) -- When radical Islamists brought unprecedented terror to the United States Sept. 11, 2001, they also escalated a debate that's been raging for centuries: Is *Jihad* a personal, internal struggle against evil inclinations, or holy war against non-Muslim infidels?

The issue is a lightning rod for controversy, and as Christians seek to understand Islam and reach out to its 1.2 billion faithful with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's important that they take a closer look at this Islamic ideology. So says Dr. N.S.R.K. Ravi of the Interfaith Witness Team of the North American Mission Board (NAMB), who spoke Aug. 15-17 at the National Conference on Islam at LifeWay's Ridgecrest Conference Center.

"Throughout history, Islamic and non-Islamic scholars have debated the concept of *Jihad*," said Ravi, who was raised as a Hindu in an Islamic region of India. "Even among Islamic scholars there are various interpretations of this principle. Some Islamic scholars consider *Jihad* the sixth pillar of Islam, superior even to the obligatory acts of prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage. One thing is clear: According to Islamic teachings, *Jihad* is *fard* (an obligation) for every Muslim."

The term *Jihad* is derived from the Arabic term "Jahada," which means to endeavor, strive, or struggle. It is sometimes translated "holy war." In religious contexts, *Jihad* means to struggle against one's evil inclinations, but in many circles the word is understood in a military sense rather than its universal meaning in the Qur'an (Islam's holy book) and the Hadith (the words and deeds of Islam's founder Muhammad).

Muslims contend that the main purpose of *Jihad* is to protect and preserve the *haqq* (truth), said Ravi. Some believe the way to deal with those who pose obstacles to the spread of Islam is to declare *Jihad* against them. This can take on peaceful forms: *Jihad* with the tongue (speaking the truth), *Jihad* with the heart (feelings and intentions), and *Jihad* with the hand (good works).

However, the Qur'an also encourages *Jihad* with the sword – to defend Islam from attack, or to forcefully establish Islam in foreign lands if Islam is not granted free expression there. In this sense, *Jihad* may be waged against oppressors, disbelievers, idolaters, and even Christians and Jews.

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"Those who participate in *Jihad* are told they will receive rewards from Allah, ranging from the spoils of war if they survive, to entrance into paradise if they're killed in battle, according to the Hadith," said Ravi. "No wonder some extremist Muslims are willing to die in the name of *Jihad*."

So, what of Osama bin Laden's call for *Jihad* against America and the West? What of the *Jihad* that kept Iran and Iraq gripped in a bloody 8-year standoff? What of the teenage Palestinian homicide bombers who, in the name of *Jihad*, readily blow themselves up in crowded Israeli streets? What of Muhammad Atta and the other Sept. 11 hijackers?

Muslims around the world will disagree as to whether these acts of *Jihad* were faithful to Islamic teaching or horrible abuses, but to Ravi that misses the point. "Isn't it sad," he said, "that Islam, which offers no assurance of salvation, holds out the possibility of heaven only to those who sacrifice their lives for Allah. Christianity is just the opposite. Our God sacrificed His life for us at Calvary so we might live with Him in heaven."

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