

Trying to understand Osama bin Laden: Vanderbilt professors discuss writings and threats

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Some reading groups choose great fiction or fast-moving mysteries. At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, one group of professors chose the writings and threats of Osama bin Laden as their discussion material.

For nearly a year, these professors of religion, politics, history and law have gathered as a critical audience to analyze bin Laden, a man who looms large in world terrorism yet who remains a mystery to many Americans.

They emphasize that they do not sympathize with the al-Qaeda leader, nor do they want to add academic weight to his teachings or beliefs. They merely want to understand the man, his purpose and the source of his influence and hatred.

"It's not like you can turn on the television and hear a ten-minute press release from al-Qaeda," said Richard McGregor, an assistant professor of Islamic studies, who helped start the group. "Our media are not going to give air time to these people. They're not going to give air time to Osama bin Laden, they say, for strategic reasons."

Bin Laden's statements are under study at other colleges and universities, too. At Emory University in Atlanta, students will study his statements this fall as part of a course on religion, violence and terrorism titled simply "Osama bin Laden."

Vanderbilt's reading group has a dozen members, who meet about once a month. They are on hiatus this summer but are planning a panel discussion for the public to share what they've learned.

The group studies bin Laden's statements, old interviews with journalists and other materials carrying his voice. After its November release, the group began studying *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, edited by Bruce

Lawrence, a Duke University religion professor.

The group makes light of concerns about public perceptions of their work and government surveillance of their Internet activities and phone calls.

Michael Rose, an associate professor of composition in Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music, laughed in recalling his second thoughts about reading *Messages to the World* in the park with his dog. But the concerns are not unfounded. McGregor, a Canadian, is not a U.S. citizen, and he is not the only unnaturalized immigrant in the group.

The materials are disturbing to read. Some faculty members invited to participate declined, McGregor said. "It is chilling to see somebody articulate so carefully these horrible, horrible acts," he said. "These are not the ramblings of an insane, incoherent person. He's quoting from scripture. He's quoting from the *New York Times*. And he's talking about all of these things very coherently."

The value of this study is undeniable to the group. "To understand," said Melissa Snarr, an assistant professor of ethics and society at Vanderbilt's Divinity School, "to me is really on the path to peace-building."

The study resembles an informal dinner group at times. A recent meeting had the professors munching burritos and sipping wine and soda as their conversation about bin Laden evolved into broader, weighty discussions of interreligious relations, religious history and world politics.

Drawing from each other's areas of expertise, they remarked on similarities between bin Laden's rhetoric and that of the Nazis and other such groups. Rose compared *Messages to the World* to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

"I look at the artfulness of these texts, the way Osama bin Laden crafts the language to make claims that are outrageous and hateful," said Rose, who as a Jew has found the anti-Semitic rhetoric especially troubling. He has been an observer of the group, not a participant.

The readings reveal a man who believes he is fighting for the world's salvation on two fronts, both inside the Islamic world and beyond it. He targets Middle East governments—virtually all of them—that he feels are too secular or too sympathetic to Israel and the West, and he targets non-Islamic governments like the United

States.

Bin Laden's stated ambition is an idyllic society that lives out the principles of Islam. His rhetoric appeals to the poor and middle-class masses of the Middle East who feel alienated and repressed by their dictatorial governments, the social elite and the West.

But in trying to justify his belligerence, bin Laden uses rhetoric that is weak theologically, McGregor said. "It does not have deep roots in the Qur'an or deep roots in Islamic law," he said. "Yes, he quotes the Qur'an once in a while. But within the Islamic religion itself, this is very extreme. This is really on the edge." -Amy Green, *Religion News Service*