

Counterpunch, July 24, 2002

Challenging Ignorance on Islam: A Ten-Point Primer for Americans

By Gary Leupp

We should invade [Muslim] countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."

Columnist Ann Coulter,
National Review Online, Sept. 13, 2001

"Just turn [the sheriff] loose and have him arrest every Muslim that crosses the state line."

Rep. C. Saxby Chambliss (R-GA),
Chairman of the House Subcommittee on
Terrorism and Homeland security and Senate candidate,
to Georgia law officers, November 2001

"Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him. Christianity is a faith where God sent his Son to die for you."

Attorney General John Ashcroft,
interview on Cal Thomas radio, November 2001

"(Islam) is a very evil and wicked religion wicked, violent and not of the same god (as Christianity)."

Rev. Franklin Graham
Head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association
November 2001.

"Islam is Evil, Christ is King."

Allegedly written in marker by law enforcement agents on a Muslim prayer calendar in the home of a Muslim being investigated by police in Dearborn, Michigan, July 2002.

People with power and influence in the U.S. have been saying some very stupid things about Islam and about Muslims since September 11. Some of it is rooted in conscious malice, and ethnic prejudice that spills over into religious bigotry. But some is rooted in sheer historical and geographical ignorance. This is a country, after all, in which only a small minority of high school students can readily locate Afghanistan on the map, or are aware that Iranians and Pakistanis are not Arabs. As an educator, in Asian Studies, at a fairly elite university, I am painfully aware of this ignorance. But I realize it serves a purpose. It is highly useful to a power structure that banks on knee-jerk popular support whenever it embarks on a new military venture, at some far-off venue, on false pretexts immediately discernable to the better educated, but lost on the general public. The generally malleable mainstream press takes care of the rest.

I don't mean to suggest that the academic *cognoscenti*, as a "class," habitually counter this ignorance and protest the imperialist interventions that Washington routinely undertakes. Some of them may indeed support the venture, cynically asserting that the advertised pretext fulfills some sort of valid function, regardless of the lies and distortions that surround it. (I think of the depiction in the media of the "Rambouillet Accords" concerning Yugoslavia in 1999 as "the will of the international community," when one Contact Group member, Russia, rejected the U.S.-dictated plan for Kosovo outright, and several European states only signed on after their arms were twisted nearly out of their sockets. I think of the calculated, extreme exaggeration of the number of Kosovar victims of Serbian forces as the bombing of Yugoslavia began. The lies surrounding that bombing were obvious to anyone studying the situation, but even some rather progressive academics were all for "Operation Allied Force.") American academe is---unfortunately-- - whatever its right-wing critics may contend, not particularly left or anti-imperialist. In any case, such ignorance is not just a national embarrassment; it's really dangerous. Raw material for a made-in-USA version of fascism.

To understand the contemporary world, we all need to know something about Islam--beyond the inane contribution of the Attorney General cited above. So I have prepared this little primer on Islam for Americans (suitable for ages 13 and above, so appropriate for high school use), dealing not with its theology so much as its general character as an important force in the world, presently encountering unprecedented, unprincipled attack from various quarters. (Oh, and by the way, I'm not a Muslim, but what those on the Christian right revile as a "secular humanist.")

1. Islam has been around for approximately 1400 years. Established on the west coast of Arabia 900 years before European settlement in America, and spreading rapidly throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa soon thereafter, **it was not designed as an anti-U.S. movement!**

The basic teachings or requirements of Islam are not difficult to grasp. They constitute the "Five Pillars of Islam": (1) profession that there is no God but God ("Allah," in Arabic), and his Prophet (the last of the prophets, the "seal of the prophets") is Muhammad; (2) daily prayer; (3) fasting during the month of Ramadan; (4) charity; and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca. Whatever you may think of this package, it's not terribly threatening to the non-Muslim.

2. Islam's teachings are contained in a fairly compact book, the Qur'an, which Muslims believe was dictated to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. They believe of it precisely what Jews and Christians believe of their scriptures: that is, it's the Word of God. This book, like the Bible, demands belief in monotheism; refers to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jesus, etc. (far more space is given to Mary, mother of Jesus, in the Qur'an than in the New Testament); has a substantial legalistic component reminiscent of the Old Testament *Book of Leviticus*, and poetic content as beautifully uplifting as the *Book of Psalms*. For religious and secular scholars alike, **it is absolutely clear that Islam stems from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, we should think in terms of the "Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition."**

(Some fundamentalist Christians, of course, see Islam as the work of Satan, and medieval Christians in Europe saw it as a *heresy* rather than as "paganism. The point is---for better or worse---Muslims have a whole lot more in common with the dominant religious trends in the U.S. than do, say, Buddhists or Hindus.)

3. Muslims are about 20% of the world's population; Christians, about 30%. (The U.S. Muslim population is estimated between 5 and 8 million; U.S. Jews between 5 and 6 million). The global Jewish population is statistically quite small, so one can say **the Judeo-Christian-Islamic population is roughly half the world's total**. The consequences of a protracted religious war, pitting Christians and Jews against Muslims, are highly unpleasant to consider.

4. The Qur'an depicts Jews and Christians as "People of the Book," meaning that they have their own scriptures bestowed upon them by God (*Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God, related to the Hebrew *Elohim*; we should see it as analogous to the German word *Gott*, the French *Dieu*, or the Spanish *Dios*. It's not the personal name of a deity within a pantheon, like Thor, Aphrodite or Siva.)

Muslim scripture counsels respect for these communities, and indeed, **in the history of Islam, within Islamic societies Jews and Christians have fared FAR better than non-Christians in Christendom**. Muslims ruled all or part of Spain from around 800 to the late 15th century, when Columbus' great patrons, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella "drove the Moors (Muslims) out of Spain," forced everybody to embrace Catholic Christianity (or be killed), and promoted the exquisite Christian tortures of the Inquisition. Under Muslim rule, Christian and Jewish communities generally flourished from Spain to Iraq. On the other hand, until recent times, Christian *intolerance* prevailed throughout Europe.

5. **The Qu'ran does NOT call upon Muslims to KILL all non-Muslims.** It calls for the destruction of "infidels," meaning principally Arabs who, during the time of Muhammad, practiced idolatry and polytheism. Again: this is a seventh-century book, produced in a specific historical context! It, and the Muslim religion, should be studied and understood objectively, dispassionately. Islam emerged very quickly, and within decades united under its banner-the banner of monotheism---the various tribes of Arabia. Its violent rejection of idolatry, however offensive to the modern, secular, humanist mind, is hardly unique. It can be compared to the ferocious suppression in Christian Europe of paganism (often associated with witchcraft).

And for perspective, while the Qu'ran *does* call for the extermination of "infidels," the Old Testament is replete with its own exhortations to genocide. According to the Biblical narrative (of dubious historicity, but believed by hundreds of millions), the Hebrews under Joshua's leadership, invading Canaan from Egypt, killed twelve thousand "men and women together" in the town of Ai-because God wanted them to (Joshua 8:25). The Hebrews put all the people of Hazor to the sword (they "wiped them all out; they did not leave one living soul." Judges 11:14). The poetics of hatred are as conspicuous in the Bible as in the Qu'ran. A personal favorite of mine, from Psalm 137, refers to the

Babylonians: "A blessing on him who takes and dashes your babies against the rock!" Such references are characteristic of Judeo-Christian-Islamic literature, and are best examined in historical perspective.

6. Islamic "fundamentalism" is not a species apart from other fundamentalisms, including the Christian, Jewish, and Hindu varieties. They are *all* anti-modern, anti-science, anti-intellectual, rarely harmless and potentially (if not necessarily) fascistic. They demand belief in received dogma, inscribed in texts, rather than open-ended scientific inquiry. They either legitimate the existing order, or call for a return to a past social order in which class and gender relations were properly sorted out in line with the Divine Will.

Some (including non-religious people in or from Muslim countries) criticize Islam (appropriately, in my view) for what they consider backward and reactionary features. This is not the place to deal with such criticisms, nor am I the right person to do it. I will merely observe what many others have observed: Christendom underwent the Enlightenment—an evolution towards secularism, rationalism, and scientific thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—which the Islamic world, in general, has not yet experienced. To become "modern" (more specifically, to become *capitalist*), the West had to become more ideologically tolerant (i.e., less religious), and allow a freer market in ideas than had been possible when the Church monopolized learning. If mullahs monopolize education in much of the Muslim world, they serve a function identical with that of Europe's medieval Catholic clergy.

But our own Enlightenment is not irreversible. Top U.S. officials reject the theory of evolution in favor of the ludicrous "theory" of "creationism," and seek to criminalize abortion on the grounds that a fetus is a human being created by God. Recent changes in U.S. law (allowing the use of vouchers to support religious schools at taxpayer's expense), and the failure of the courts to prosecute behavior which plainly violates the constitutional separation of church and state, demonstrate that medieval thinking and fundamentalism retain a strong hold in sections of U.S. society, and are well represented in the Bush administration. The American people are, I submit, far more threatened by *Christian* fundamentalism than its Islamic counterpart. And for a Pentecostalist Christian like John Ashcroft, who believes every word of the Bible literally, to inveigh against Islam (as he has) is (to use the English proverb) the "pot calling the kettle black."

7. Islamic fundamentalism (or what some, including CNN Moneyline's Lou Dobbs calls "Islamism," meaning a specifically political Islam) has NOT, historically, posed a great threat to Western interests (by which I mean corporate, oil, and geopolitical interests) but rather been exploited to SERVE those interests. Remember Lawrence of Arabia? What was his objective other than to forge a British alliance with the Hashemites, who would certainly qualify as "Islamists" by Lou Dobb's standards, during World War I? Later, the British boosted the Saudi royal family (patrons of the Wahhabi school of Islam, usually described as among the most conservative, embraced by Osama bin Laden as well as the Saudis in general) into power. The U.S. inherited Saudi Arabia as a client state after World War II, and we all know how well U.S. oil

companies have done there ever since. (Aramco alone, prior to its nationalization in the mid-1980s, yielded some \$ 3 trillion from the Arabian reserves.)

The U.S. helped create, recruit, and finance the fundamentalist Mujahadeen, including some 30,000 young volunteers who came from throughout the Muslim world to fight "godless Communism" in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The U.S. *encouraged* them to view their war as a *jihad* (in the sense of a "Holy War," a meaning the term usually does NOT carry), and put many in contact with young Osama bin Laden, then an ally. The Reagan administration was in *love* with fundamentalist Islam, so long as it served its purposes.

The California-based company Unocal was cordially negotiating right up to Sept. 11 with Afghanistan's Taliban for an oil pipeline through Afghan territory, State Department official and oilman Zalmay Khalilzad was arguing up through 1998 that the Taliban were friendly, potential business partners who did "not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced in Iran."

8. Muslims of the world have many thoroughly LEGITIMATE reasons to resent U.S. policy. Nearly absolute support for the settler state of Israel in its relationship with the indigenous Palestinian people. Imposition of brutal sanctions on Iraq, contrary to logic and morality. Maintenance of bases throughout the Persian Gulf, in defiance of local sensibilities and interests. Support for brutal regimes, including that of the Shah of Iran and that of Indonesia's Suharto (who unquestionably has more blood on his hands than even that arch-villain and former U.S. buddy Saddam Hussein).

9. Muslims typically DO NOT hate the U.S. as an abstract concept, reject U.S. culture in toto, or seek the destruction of American civilization. Many are, indeed, uncomfortable with some aspects of American behavior, as are most people in the world, from Central America to Japan. But a Zogby International poll, released June 11 of this year, shows that in nine Muslim countries, including Bangladesh and Malaysia, the most admired foreign country is the U.S.

10. Muslims and Jews in Palestine/Israel have NOT always hated one another, and the current Middle East conflict does NOT go back many centuries. Rather, it began with the influx of foreign Jews into the region after World War I, which became a flood as a result of the Holocaust, and with international support resulted in the formation of Israel as a specifically Jewish state in 1948. Jewish settlement and terrorism (well-documented by the Jewish Israeli historian Ilan Pappé) resulted in the displacement of 750,000 Palestinian Arabs (including both Christians and Muslims). The Arab-Israeli conflict is not, fundamentally, about Islam, or a clash between Islam and other faiths, but about this-worldly land grabbing, settlement, dispossession and oppression that has enraged the Muslim world, as it should enrage any thinking, moral human being. Unfortunately, fundamentalist Christians in this country tend to depict this history of injustice as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, and they will brook no dissent when it comes to the Zionist cause that they have embraced as their own. ("God gave them the land, so don't bother me with historical details. End of discussion.") Hard to imagine a delusion more injurious to world peace and to the cause of justice.

Finally: In understanding Islam, Americans should give some thought to one of the pivotal episodes in world history, the Crusades, or Wars of the Cross, that ripped up the Holy Land between 1096 and 1291. During these two centuries, European Christians seeking to "win back for Christendom" territory that had fallen to the Muslim Turks-territory that had been ruled by Muslims since the early seventh century anyway, on terms generally agreeable to Jews and Christians as well as Muslims-committed unspeakable atrocities. In July 1099 Jerusalem was conquered, the Roman Catholic soldiers massacring all the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants, including women and children. Nor was the Crusaders' zeal exhausted upon non-Christians; frustrated at lack of success in Palestine in 1204, they instead sacked Constantinople (modern Istanbul), then the center of Eastern Orthodoxy. In comparison, the behavior of the Muslim armies was chivalrous, the twelfth-century Kurdish leader Saladin in particular winning high praise from Christians and Muslims alike for his humanity.

The Islamic world remembers the Crusades; George Bush, like many Americans, is clueless about them. Hence his amazingly dim-witted reference to the "War on Terrorism" as a "Crusade" last September 16-a statement that produced immediate, widespread outrage in the Muslim world. No offense intended, no doubt. But such ignorance, in action, in a world where religious prejudice generates idiotic action from Belfast, to the Balkans, to Gujarat, to the Moluccas, is perilous ignorance indeed.

Gary Leupp is an an associate professor, Department of History, Tufts University and coordinator, Asian Studies Program. He can be reached at: gleupp@tufts.edu