

The Pope and Islam

Well now it's the Pope's turn to get it! It's over his remarks about Islam's history of spreading religion by the sword. It is true he was quoting a medieval source and, frankly, the record of Christianity in Medieval times was immeasurably worse than Islam. Just recall what happened to the population of Jerusalem when the Crusaders conquered it in 1099. But history is history and no amount of protest is going to erase historical fact or exhortations in the Koran and the later Hadith.

It doesn't matter if the remarks were taken out of context. It's a case of being "hoist on your own petard". The majority of the Muslim world seems perfectly happy to tolerate a pervading culture of anti-Semitism and denigration of Jews and Judaism, but the minute anyone says anything against them, from the common man in the street to its senior politicians, are back there demonstrating, burning flags, attacking buildings, hurling abuse and looking like a pack of angry hyenas ("Sorry, we're out of effigies of Bush today; how about the Pope?"). Ahmadinejad can claim there was no Holocaust and display his childish cartoons, but some Danish paper dares to make fun of Mohammad, or the Pope reminds them of their own history, and there's an explosion of righteous indignation.

Ruth Gledhill, the religion correspondent of the London Times, one of the most balanced and least judgmental of religious correspondents, writes on her blog:

"After all, we in the West have truly suffered at the hands of the Salafi Jihadists, as the Archbishop of York suggests we call them. We've had 9/11, 7/7 and narrowly escaped another. There is Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon, and I am among those who firmly resist placing responsibility for the ills committed in these wars solely at the feet of the West. It does seem bizarre that we keep having to apologize to Muslims. "Turn the other cheek," says the Christian religion of the West and we do seem to keep doing just that. In spite of the fact that those responsible for the terrorist atrocities would themselves confess to being of the Islamic faith, and of committing their crimes in the name of Islam, even to write about Islam and terrorism in the same sentence is fast becoming surefire way to end up on Islamophobia Watch at the very least."

I am grateful to Linda Hepner for referring me to an impressive article by Martin Ames that appeared in the Observer earlier this month, noteworthy as much for its style as its content, in which he describes the history and the ideology of that, relatively small, brand of fanaticism that has now taken over, bullied and cowed the Muslim world to the point where moderates dare not speak up and Western liberals fawn and deny and ignore the issue by blaming, Bush, Israel and the Jews. Why just this week when Kofi Annan tried once again to pin it all on Israel, a British Minister was barracked for suggesting that the Muslim community ought to take responsibility for its violent radicals. The so called moderate Muslim response was that it was all the fault of British foreign policy. Of course! Supporting Israel explains Kashmiri violence!

In Europe we are living in a climate of opinion that makes any remark that is in any way negative about any aspect of Islam almost a punishable offense, bringing politicians right out of the woodwork to grovel and apologize. I concede that there are far too many Islamophobic jobs in Europe. But the trouble is that the more the Islamic jobs proliferate so too, action leads to reaction, and you get more skinheads or urban conflict that reflects Indian sub-continent rivalries.

Here we are, living in a free society, where over the years our treasured and hard-won liberties have been slowly challenged. It began with the craven response of the "chattering classes" to the fatwa against Rushdie for a work of fiction. It moved on to censoring plays and entertainment. It progressed to legislation forbidding one from making fun. Then politicians fearing their inner-city seats started to appease. And now it seems one cannot even quote history.

So what was Popey thinking? Apologists say he is an academic, and a man who was cloistered in the Vatican for almost all his post-Hitler-Youth life, so was unaware of the possible impact. Phooey. The Pope is a highly intelligent, politically experienced and sophisticated man. He knew jolly well what sort of impact his remarks would make. In fact, several times this year the Pope has refused to describe Islam as a religion of peace and has said such things as, "I would not like to use. . . generic labels. It certainly contains elements that can favor peace, it also has other elements: We must always seek the best elements." (www.worldnetdaily.com/news).

He sees the total retreat of European religion in the face of the Eastern fundamentalists and he has decided at last, belatedly, to try to put his foot down and start something of a counterrevolution. Even so, all he actually said was that the struggle for religious supremacy should be confined to theology rather than the sword or fire. Big Deal! But thank goodness someone else is saying to the Muslims, "Stop behaving like spoilt, aggressive children." Except it now seems he was not making a stand, as his apologies indicate, unless we assume he changed his mind or was making a point rather than a stand!

We must combat all manifestations of Islamophobia and not allow one single Muslim to feel threatened on the streets. But at the same time we can expect reciprocity as Jews. And as intellectuals we ought not to allow any fundamentalist to cramp our minds and our freedoms by trying to prevent us thinking and speaking. It's sad that the fight back is coming from other religions because I'm not entirely happy about their motives. But if no one else will, then at least let there be alternative voices. Certainly the Left Wing has sold out to fascism in its hatred of Israel, so no help is going come from them.

And now I return to us Jews. We, too, have a little, and not exactly comparable tendency to behave like spoilt children. We are so hypersensitive about the Holocaust that we treat any criticism as heresy. Of course it was a genocide unlike an other, in that actual killing factories were built with incredible efficiency and skill and a whole network built to feed them. Rwanda, Cambodia, Darfur were/are terrible modern genocides too, but none

created crematoria. Therefore there was justification in picking it as a symbol of humanity's failure and in Europe in particular something not to be denied by law. But I have always been unhappy about Holocaust memorial days and legislation against ideas. They descend into tokenism. I have, on the contrary, always admired the Charedi response—no special days, just the whole of their lives dedicated to defeating our enemies by surviving and growing and strengthening positively rather than negatively.

Here's a quote from this week's Jewish Tribune, the voice of Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy (one of them, at any rate):

Reb M. T. (speaking at the opening of a new Gerrer Hassidic prayer and study centre in North London) made an emotional speech and told the audience how his father was forced by the Nazis to knock down a Beis Hamedrash with his own hands. The young man made a promise that if given the chance he would devote his life to rebuilding Botei Midrash and yeshivas stone by stone.

Isn't that moving, optimistic and constructive? That's the spirit!

And so with anti-Semitism, yes, it is reviving and spreading and we must combat it. Today I heard from a friend that at a Muslim Friday service in Camden the Imam was spewing vitriolic hatred against Jews and Mr Blair on council property. Doesn't the Council have enough Arabic speakers to find out what's really going on? European anti-Semitism "lite" is now the norm rather than the exception. Nevertheless in London there are no gangs of Mosleyites roaming Golders Green... yet. No Nuremburg laws have been passed. No double-parking Jewish housewife is scared she'll be sent to a concentration camp for flouting the law. Life for Jews in Britain, despite Mr. Livingstone, is still pretty good. We should be focusing on building bridges and being positive. Indeed we ought to be looking at the behavior of some of our own, rabbis and rapacious, not to say devious, businessmen of all religious shades.

Sooner or later the Muslim world will grow up, adjust to living in an open society and realize that, where we and they live, persuasion works far more effectively than coercion. If the only way to protect your religion is by silencing those you don't agree with or like, then believe me, you might win battles but you've already lost the war!

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