



Three Myths About Islam

BY EDWARD N. LUTTWAK
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Many people know many things about Islam and its history. Unfortunately, much of what they know happens to be untrue. The great Jewish Orientalists of the 19th century, such as Gustav Weil and Ignaz Goldziher, can be blamed for myth no. 1: that Islam is especially tolerant of other religions. Their scholarship was immense but they were too eager to praise Islam to remain objective.

Christians and Jews ("Peoples of the Book") are exempted from the death-or-conversion choice imposed on pagans (the Zoroastrians of Iran were later added to the list), but under all known schools of Muslim law, Christians and Jews are only allowed to survive as dhimmis, of protected subjects, under a long list of deliberately humiliating restrictions, obligations, and prohibitions. Some are obsolete - they had to pay a head tax, they were not allowed to ride horses as opposed to humble donkeys, and many more - but others remain in force.

In Egypt, for example, there are at least 10 million Christians, but under the constitution, only a Muslim can be president - and there are similar provisions in other Muslim republics. In Saudi Arabia - where no one can be elected president, since the entire state and all its oil are claimed as private property by the ruling family - there are millions of Christians, but they are not allowed to have a single church, and it is a criminal offense to hold a prayer service, however informal, anywhere else. In all Muslim lands, the penalty for assisting a Muslim to convert was and is death for all concerned - no small matter for believing Christians whose highest duty is to save other souls by conversion.

Nevertheless, sections on Islam in American college texts are full of fantasies about Islamic tolerance, often featuring a mythic Andalusia where all was wonderfully multicultural until the wicked Christians arrived. Absurdly, some of those same texts celebrate, as yet another example of tolerance, the welcome that the fleeing Maimonides received in Fatimid Egypt: He had fled from Andalusia, of course, then the scene of one of Islam's recurrent outbursts of murderous fanaticism; we are living through another.

It is perfectly true that until quite recently, Christians were even more intolerant than Muslims, exempting only Jews from the prohibition of all other religions, and persecuting even the Jews at times. But Muslims are only slightly less culpable when compared to the greater part of humanity: serenely indifferent Hindus and

Jains, agnostic Confucians, aesthetic Shinto devotees, cheerfully pluralist Buddhists, and more.

Myth no. 2 is that Muslim extremists are not attacking us, but only counterattacking, so that if non-Muslims would only stop provoking them, all would be well. It is perfectly true that in recent decades Muslims of one kind or another have suffered decisive defeats in the Indian subcontinent, in Iraq, Israel, and Timor-Leste, among other places. Westerners easily empathize with people under attack, so many in the West readily accept the claim that Muslim violence is just a defensive reaction. That is Osama bin Laden's version, too, when addressing non-Muslims: He talks about the sufferings of the Muslims of Chechnya, Palestine (a Muslim land for him, whose Christians and Jews are irrelevant), Kashmir, Andalusia, and Timor-Leste.

But when Mr. bin Laden talks to his fellow Muslims, he says something else entirely: "I was ordered to fight [non-Muslims] until they say that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is his prophet." That is a trifle pretentious in echoing the exact words that Muhammad himself supposedly declaimed, but it is certainly orthodox Islam: Muslims must convert non-Muslims by force, if necessary, or otherwise kill them, unless they are exempted Christians or Jews. That is why Islam has been on the attack from its birth in the seventh century. Muhammad started fighting to force conversions and his followers continued fighting in all directions, successfully spreading Islam by force from Arabia to the wider Middle East, and across Asia.

The only reason the continuity of Muslim aggression is news to some is because until recently almost all Muslim countries were under European colonial rule or subjected to European protectorates. Under Christian rule, Muslims could hardly continue to attack. With de-colonialization, the violence resumed. It has now reached virtually all places where Muslims are in contact with non-Muslims, so that there are almost daily reports of outrages from Nigeria, Sudan, and Egypt in Africa; from Iraq (Christians are fleeing the country), Israel, and Lebanon in the Middle East; from India, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Timor-Leste, by the way, happens to be mostly Christian, but because it was liberated from the domination of Muslim-ruled Indonesia, it is now on the list of Islamic grievances under the Muslim doctrine that any land once ruled by Muslims belongs to Islam forever, even if the population is mostly non-Muslim. That is the doctrine cited by Hamas to claim the whole of Israel, and which other fundamentalists do not hesitate to apply to southern Spain, southeast Europe, and much of southern Ukraine and southeast Russia, among other places.

But Muslims certainly cannot be faulted for Myth no. 3: that Islam is a religion of peace. That myth is strictly the creation of Western liberals and especially American educational administrators, librarians, and academics determined to

invent their own peaceful Islam, in which even Jihad is always or at least mostly an entirely nonviolent spiritual struggle.

That reflects the very American belief that all religions are equally good, when in the harsh reality of history they are not even equally bad. How many Buddhist attacks upon Muslims were recorded around the world in retaliation for the destruction of the colossal Buddhist rock carvings at Bamyán in Afghanistan?

Zero, in spite of the fact that the destruction was not the spontaneous misdeed of a few hotheads but rather an organized attack with artillery, formally authorized by Muslim clerics of the vast Deobandi movement (headquartered in secular India, where it enjoys tax-exempt status). What would happen to Buddhists in Muslim lands if a comparable mosque - if any such exists - were deliberately destroyed by the formal order of assembled Buddhist priests? One could go down the list of other religions to construct an infinity of examples showing that they are not all the same when it comes to violence, but it is hardly necessary to expose the fraud perpetrated in many texts on Islam now being taught in American schools and universities.

None of the three myths can survive the light of competent scholarship, and the author of "Islamic Imperialism: A History" (Yale University Press, 288 pages, \$30), Efraim Karsh, of King's College, London, is much more than merely competent. He starts at the beginning, with the missionary preaching of Muhammad in the seventh century, and almost reaches the present. In just 234 pages of text, Mr. Karsh recounts and analyzes the different forms of Islamic imperialism, starting with the first Muslim conquests of the Arabs, which were astonishingly successful because of an extraordinary coincidence: They attacked out of the desert just when the Byzantine and Sassanid Persian empires had fought each other to exhaustion in the last, longest, and by far most destructive of their many wars. Muhammad's promise of victory was thus validated in a way that evidently seemed miraculous to his followers.

The Arab ascendancy lasted more than two centuries, but then it was the Turkic converts to Islam who became the warriors, and then inevitably the rulers. This process started with the appearance of Turkic raiders on the Christian borderlands of the Byzantine Empire, and with the Turkic palace guards of Arab potentates, and culminated in the Ottoman Empire, which conquered Constantinople in 1453 and survived largely intact for more than 400 years.

Mr. Karsh does not explore all the many and varied Muslim polities of Asia, Africa, and Europe (Spain, Sicily, the Crimea): some brilliantly successful and tolerant also (up to a point), such as the Mughal empire at its best; some murderously intolerant, such as the Mughal empire at its worst, but all of them necessarily imperialist. Mr. Karsh is not a Leninist who falls for the canard that imperialism is merely aggravated capitalism, and he is not a political primitive for whom the word is a species of wickedness, so his account is far from hostile.

Yes, there was loot to be had when attacking the infidel successfully, but down

the centuries the motivation was primarily, or largely, or at least significantly idealistic.

Believing Muslims, like Christians, believe that only their faith (or rather their own version of it) can provide salvation from an eternity of suffering after death. It follows that it is wicked for a Muslim (or Christian) not to do his best to convert as many as possible, which can best be done under a Muslim rule, as the Muslims rightly believe (there are very few converts in non-Muslim lands). Muslim imperialism is therefore a religious duty, motivated by an altruistic love of humanity.

Even a suicide bomber who kills only innocent babies can rightly claim that insofar as he contributes to the ultimate victory of Islam, he will ultimately save many more babies from eternal suffering, giving them paradise instead, complete with virginal black-eyed beauties, if they are males. It is enough to make one nostalgic for the imperialist freebooters of the West, down to King Leopold I of Belgium: They only wanted loot, not to force salvation on their victims.

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