

What's Ailing Islam?

Not long ago, eleven journalists were assassinated in Paris and a Jordanian man was burnt alive by terrorists who murder people who do not share their fundamentalist religious views. I used to think that such atrocities were a portal back into the Middle Ages where killing in the name of God was quite common, not only by Muslims but Christians too. But we need not go back that far. African American people were being tortured, hung and burnt alive in the United States a hundred years ago by devoted Christians. As we look with disgust at Islamic terrorism, we need to realize that the demon of such atrocities possessed our ancestors. I sometimes wonder what would happen today if it were not for our police and legal system riding herd on Tea Party sorts holding placards of a hangmen's noose while shouting obscenities at President Obama. The demon, if let loose, would still raise havoc in America.

Doctor George Tiller was murdered in 2009 by Scott Roeder during Sunday morning worship at a Church in Wichita. Doctor Tiller was one of the few doctors in America performing late term abortions. The killer was a Christian terrorist, a term seldom used in societies where Christianity is the dominant religion. Unfortunately, in some Arab countries, one cannot blame Islamic terrorism on the lack of law enforcement. After all, Bin Laden was killed a short distance from what would be considered Pakistan's West Point.

Arab countries like Saudi Arabia that have cultivated and supported Islamic fundamentalism are now finding themselves in the midst of a clash of civilizations. The Frankenstein they winked at within their legal system for years has now given birth and the rest of civilized society is shocked and terrorized by what they have nurtured. But not all Arabs have been winking.

In 2002 a committee of Arab intellectuals under the auspices of the United Nations published the candid "Arab Human Development Report", said to be "written by Arabs for Arabs". (R.Fisk, "UN highlights uncomfortable truths for Arab world," [The Independent](#), July 3, 2002) The authors documented that Arab nations were plagued by political repression, economic backwardness, oppression of women, widespread illiteracy, and a self-imposed isolation from the world of ideas... It wasn't always that way. During the Middle ages, Islamic civilization was unquestionably more refined than Christendom. While Europeans were applying their ingenuity to the Inquisition and designing instruments of torture, Muslims were preserving classical Greek culture, absorbing the knowledge of the civilizations of India and China, and advancing astronomy, architecture, cartography, medicine, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. (Stephen Pinker, "The Better Angels of our Nature" P. 364.)

Why did Islam blow its lead and fail to have an Age of Reason, an Enlightenment, and a Humanitarian Revolution?... It was / is because of the lack of separation between

mosque and state. Muhammad was not just a spiritual leader but a political and military one, and only recently have any Islamic states had the concept of a distinction between the secular and the sacred. With every potential intellectual contribution filtered through religious spectacles, opportunities for absorbing and combining new ideas were lost. ... Whatever the historical reasons, a large chasm appears to separate Western and Islamic cultures today. According to a famous theory from the political scientist Samuel Huntington, the chasm has brought us to a new age in the history of the world: the clash of civilizations. (Ibid p. 365-66)

Steven Pinker in his book "The Better Angels of Our Nature" goes on to state: *Westerners tend to know Muslims through two dubious exemplars: the fanatics who grab headlines with their fatwas and jihads, and the oil-cursed autocrats who rule over them. The beliefs of the hitherto silent (and frequently silenced) majority make less of a contribution to our stereotypes. Can 1.3 billion Muslims really be untouched by the liberalizing tide that has swept the rest of the world in recent decades? (Ibid. p 366)*

He also makes an interesting statement about Sharia law when referencing a 2001-2007 Gallup poll regarding the attitudes of Muslims in thirty-five countries representing 90 percent of the world's Islamic population. The results of the poll confirmed that *most Islamic states will not become secular liberal democracies anytime soon. Majorities of Muslims in Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan, and Bangladesh told pollsters that Sharia, the principles behind Islamic law, should be the only source of legislation in their countries, and majorities in most of the countries said it should be at least one of the sources. (Ibid 366-7)* However, what is most interesting and something we Christians need to keep in mind is that the majority of Americans believe that the Bible should be one of the sources of legislation, and presumably they don't mean that people who work on Sunday should be stoned to death. (See Exodus 31:12-15)

Pinker states, *like Americans' commitment to the Bible, most Muslims' commitment to Sharia is more a symbolic affiliation with moral attitudes that they associate with the best of their culture than a literal desire to see adulteresses stoned to death. In practice, creative and expedient reading of Sharia for liberal ends have often prevailed against the oppressive fundamentalist readings. That is why most Muslims see no contradiction between Sharia and democracy. Indeed, despite their professed affection for the idea of Sharia, a large majority believe that religious leaders should have no direct role in drafting their country's constitution.*

More than 90 of percent of Muslims would guarantee freedom of speech in their nation's constitution, and large numbers also support freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. Substantial majorities of both sexes in all the major Muslim countries say that women should be allowed to vote without influence from men and enjoy the same legal rights as men. (Ibid)

So, what we are seeing today there is a growing disconnect between the majority of Muslims and their conservative religious / governmental leaders. The atmosphere within Islam today is similar to Christianity during the Great Reformation of the 16th century. Martin Luther and other reformers represented the views of most Christians in Northern Europe. They wanted the dictatorship of the Papacy to end and the laity to arise and take control of their church. Luther and his associates helped to craft a theology of the separation between church and state, but that did not mean they wanted the values and principles of Christianity separated from their culture.

Now Islam is in the midst of a reformation. The “Arab Spring” seen recently is countered by the dictatorship of clerics and others who are frightened about what it will mean to their power and their society. Nevertheless, a tipping point is being reached. The newly developed printing press fueled the Protestant reformation 500 years ago disseminating information throughout Europe. Today the Internet fuels the Islamic reformation stoking the flames with new ideas that dictatorial authorities have difficulty censoring.

Obstacles to this Islamic reformation that modern Western societies pose are the excesses of freedom and the immorality it presents. This was recently seen in the Charlie Hebdo cartoon newspaper in Paris. Under the banner of free speech, numerous degrading cartoons depicting Jesus, Mohammad, and other religious figures in various sexual acts were published. Highly offensive publications like this are an obstacle to Muslims in oppressive societies who risk their lives seeking reform and freedom of speech. Such publications poking a finger in the eye of religion do a disservice to both democracy and freedom. For sure, the killing of journalists is always to be condemned and prosecuted, but this is also an occasion to discuss the problem of hate speech disguising itself as free speech.

Let us pray for Islam that it may move into 21st century civilization embracing freedom and developing a healthy separation between church and state. Let us also pray for people in modern democratic societies that they not use their freedom for hate and immorality.

~ Henry