

[Empire of Faith or Islamic Imperialism](#)

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By Jacob Thomas

Islamic jihad has assumed new forms in our modern world. When it is not waged through warfare, it goes on by means of propaganda, masquerading as an education tool. The latest means for this subtle type of jihad has been the production of “documentaries” that are aired on PBS (Public Television Stations) in the USA.

Not content with telecasting these “documentaries,” PBS makes them available on CDs through its **Teachers Resources Department**. For example, “*Islam: Empire of Faith*” is divided into five lessons, dealing with *An Introduction to Islam and Muhammad, The Fascinating Word of Islam, Creating a Textile Museum Piece from the Islamic Empire, Great thinkers and Accomplishments of Islam, and Renaissance Man Comparison Poster*. * This “documentary” is being used nowadays in American public schools.

The first airing of *Islam: Empire of Faith* took place in May 2001, a few months before the fateful jihadist attack on the USA in September of that year. I imagined at the time that would be the end of this so-called documentary. I was wrong. It was rebroadcast in January 2002 on several PBS stations.

The majority of the speakers and commentators are Western “experts” associated with such institutions as the University of Saint Louis, Columbia University, Boston College and Edinburgh University. At several intermissions during the two and half hour program, we heard the refrain that the documentary was also being made available “*through viewers like you.*”

As the documentary proceeded, I felt I was watching a thoroughly revisionist history of the Middle East since the rise of Islam. I have read Arabic books written by Muslim scholars that were far more objective than what I was watching.

The airing of “*Islam: Empire of Faith*” had hardly begun before we were told that one fourth of mankind were followers of Islam. This is a preposterous claim. The world population today is around six billion. The Muslim world has, at the most, one billion adherents. That inflated ratio alerted me right away that I was watching not an objective documentary but a piece of propaganda aimed at Western viewers most of whom have hardly known anything about the 1400 years of Islamic history.

For example, when dealing with the experience of Muhammad in a cave near Mecca, the

commentator made no qualification when saying the Prophet's "**mission was given by Divine revelation.**" While it is accurate to report that in 622 A.D., Muhammad and some of his followers moved to Medina on account of the hostility of the leaders of Mecca, it is not accurate to state, that "**Hostility always began from Meccan side.**" Muslim historians extol the ability of the Prophet to organize and initiate attacks against the Meccan caravans that were on their way to Syria. Details in the life of the Prophet that may offend Western viewers were totally left out. Indeed, it was a thoroughly sanitized biography!

As to the early years of Islam, the age of the caliphate and the conquests, the impression was given that the spread of this theistic religion was primarily due to the power of the faith. But this is not the whole story. Certainly, the early Muslims were fired with a tremendous zeal as they burst out of Arabia and entered the territories of the Byzantine and Persian Empires. But the rapid success of their conquests was not exclusively due to the "**power of the faith.**"

The two super powers of the time, Persia and the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) had been in violent conflict for several decades. They had exhausted their resources and emptied their treasuries in that rivalry. They were no longer able to subsidize the Arabized kingdoms on the borders of the Arabian Peninsula that had kept the Bedouin tribes in their homeland. Thus, when the Arab horsemen came from the south, Persia crumbled like a house of cards, while Byzantium lost its hold on Egypt and Syria.

Muslims revere the early "golden" era of their history. It lasted a little over 25 years and was called the age of the "**Rightly Guided Caliphs.**" The conquest of the Middle East had begun, and soon North Africa was to come within the Empire. At the same time, the golden age was not so golden! Of the four Caliphs that succeeded Muhammad after 632, three were assassinated. Ali, the fourth Caliph, who was a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was murdered by some of his disgruntled followers. After his death, the Caliphate became dynastic. The capital of the growing empire moved from Medina to Damascus, Syria. The Caliphs of this era, now belonging to the Sunni division of Islam, bore a fierce hostility to the family of Ali and to their Shi'ite followers. One of these Umayyad Caliphs ordered the massacre of Husein, Ali's son and his entire family. This tragic event is commemorated annually in areas of the Muslim world such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, where the majority of Shi'ite Muslims live.

Eventually, in 750 A.D., the Umayyad dynasty came to an abrupt end in a horrible blood bath. The leader of the revolt, *Abul 'Abbas* is known in Arab history as *Al-Saffah* (the blood-letter). He became the first caliph in the new dynasty, which ruled the Islamic world from Baghdad for almost 500 years. There was no mention of this tragic part of Islamic history in "**Empire of Faith.**"

On the other hand, the brutality of the Crusaders was described in great detail. Nowadays, no Christian historian would defend that tragic episode in the history of Western Christianity. But to the Western Christians of the 11th Century, the Crusades were a type of **Reconquista**. Eventually they failed. Centuries later, the Spanish mounted their own **Reconquista**, and in 1492, they were successful in driving out all the Muslims and regaining their homeland. To this very day, in the eyes of Muslims, their military conquests were divinely mandated. Thus, no criticism may be leveled against them. But non-Muslims may not, and should not claim any right to re-conquer what once was their own homeland!

In commenting on this documentary in the Winter 2002 issue of *Middle East Quarterly*, its editor, Martin Kramer wrote: “*The depiction of the Islamic empire as an ‘empire of faith’ is already a limiting one, since Islam was spread by fear as well as faith, by conquest as well as commerce. Anyone who has taken an elementary course in Islamic history will know this. Anyone who has only watched this film will not.*” P. 73

I don't want to go over all the other details that were thrust at the viewers by those scholarly men and women who kept on extolling the greatness of Islam. But the apex of my horror was reached when the Ottoman period of Islamic history was being recounted. The Ottoman Turks had come from Central Asia and served the Arab Caliphs as mercenaries. Eventually, they adopted Islam. They became the defenders and spreaders of their new faith. They pushed the boundaries of the Islamic Empire into Eastern and Central Europe. They devised a military system known as the “**Devshirme**.” This involved the seizure of Christian boys from their families in the conquered parts of Europe, and forcing them to Islamize. After rigid training they were formed into an elite army corps that would go on to expand the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. This army was known as the **Janissary**, and continued to exist until its total destruction by the Ottomans during the 19th Century.

How did the lady commentator describe this barbaric act that deprived Christian families of some of their male offspring? With a tone of full approval, and a face that manifested no sorrow whatsoever, she said that the Ottomans “**recruited Christian children**.” Is “recruited” the proper word to use here? What a blatant camouflage of an evil system that lasted so long in Eastern Europe that it left scars on its inhabitants to this very day!

In referring to the deliberate omission of the dark side of the history of Islam, Martin Kramer wrote:

“The imbalance caused by this omission is particularly unfortunate now that “Islam: Empire of Faith” has been trotted out to do service as an antidote to September 11. Gardner [reference is to the producer for PBS] made a deliberate and legitimate choice not to bring the film up to the present. But the decision by PBS to rebroadcast it after the

attacks effectively revokes the choice. If the film has some relevant message, it is the one made by a raft of “experts” who claim that violence is not a part of Islam and that jihad was never anything more than peaceful persuasion. But it’s not true. Wars of conquest expanded Islam’s frontiers and every one of them was conducted under the banner of jihad. And if anyone doubts the Islamic legitimacy of slaughtering innocents in the assault on an enemy city, they have only to look to the fall of Constantinople. They just won’t be able to find it in this film.” P. 76

It is not my intention to sound very critical of the history of Islam. My point is that the documentary that cost PBS 1.54 million dollars should have given an objective and balanced view of this history. The PBS documentary did not accomplish that. And there was too much deference shown to the Muslim organizations in the USA which played quite a role in deciding what might and might not be included in the film.

In summary, it is very difficult for Muslims, whose religion has always had a political component, to relinquish the dream of founding another great Islamic empire. But they must get rid of that dream. The task that faces Western leaders today is to speak honestly and openly with their Muslim counterparts. Muslims face some gigantic challenges during the twenty-first century, such as population explosion, the lack of water resources, and too much dependence on one major source of income--oil. The Islamists ignore these facts, and keep proclaiming, *“Al-Islam Huwa al-Hall”* (Islam is the solution.) They resort to awful measures of destruction. Unlike the Marxists whose dream was to establish an earthly paradise, a dream that kept them from contemplating horrific acts of violence, the Muslim worldview contains a supernatural element that is exploited by the radicals. The belief in an after-death paradise of bliss and unending pleasure, allows the Islamists to perpetrate acts of violence. This is exactly what they did on 11 September, 2001, and later on in many parts of the world.

It is the solemn duty of Western scholars and historians, to produce factual accounts of the history of Islam; that was not accomplished in the propagandistic PBS documentary, *“Islam: Empire of Faith.”*

***Note:**

To learn more about the extent of the subtle Islamic propaganda of the PBS’ **Teachers Resources Department**, please consult the following lessons:

[Lesson One: An Introduction to Islam and Muhammad](#)

[Lesson Two: The Fascinating World of Islam](#)

[Lesson Three: Creating a Textile Museum Piece from the Islamic Empire](#)

[Lesson Four: Great Thinkers and Accomplishments of Islam Fact Cubes](#)

[Lesson Five: Renaissance Man Comparison Poster](#)