

## Islam & The Sword : Al-Islam wal-Sayf

Author : Jacob Thomas on Sep 28, 2006 - 11:32 AM

Comments and criticisms of the lecture of Pope Benedict XVI at Regensburg University in Germany; are still appearing in the digital media of the Arab world. Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey is not satisfied with the explanations of the Pontiff, and reminds his countrymen that Cardinal Ratzinger (the former name of the new pope) opposed Turkey's entry into the European Union. On the other hand, it is a bit encouraging that not all Muslims have joined the chorus of denunciations. New titles have appeared lately pleading for moderation. One such article, with two parts, has this title, ***"This is not a Defence of the Pope."*** Another asked rhetorically, ***"Should we Crucify the Pope, or Crucify Logic to Defend the Prophet?"***

In the meantime, I would like to deal with a response to the charge that Islam spread by force. It appeared in a Saudi newspaper, and was later posted on the daily, [www.elaph.com](http://www.elaph.com) on Sunday, 24 September 2006. It had this title ***"Al-Islam wal-Sayf" (Islam and the Sword.)***

The following are some excerpts, followed by comments that appeared in the section, ***"Readers' Comments."***

*"To claim that Islam spread by the sword was a widespread theory during the Middle Ages. However, the world has, by now left it behind. It is not only Muslim historians who point to the fact that Islam spread peacefully, but some Western historians, such as Thomas Arnold, a well-known English historian, dealt with the fact that Islam spread through the promotion of its culture, and its readiness to meet the needs of mankind. His book, **"The Call to Islam"** proved that the sword was only a secondary factor, and not the main reason, for the Islamic **futuh**, or conquests of the world.*

*"Dr. Arnold, a neutral and eminent researcher, provided several historical examples in support of his thesis. He stated that Muslims treated Arab Christians with great tolerance from the very first century of the Hijra; and this tolerant treatment has continued throughout successive centuries. As for those Christian tribes who adopted Islam, they did so freely. Arab Christians living among Muslims today, are another proof of Islam's tolerance. As for the spread of Islam in black Africa and in Eastern Asia, that took place thanks to the **da'wa**\* of Muslim merchants. Thus, to claim that Islam spread through the sword is a theory that has no foundation at all.*

*"On the other hand, Thomas Arnold's theory, both then and now, has been met with a storm of protest and vilification. Muslims, who subscribe to a jihadi ideology, regard it as an imperialistic plot designed to empty Islam of its power and ability to spread. How ludicrous it is, that Ayman Zawahiri, the theorist of al-Qaeda, has been critical of the Pope's lecture, while, at the same time, he keeps on repeating that the sword, violence, and Irhab, are the best way to spread Islam!*

*“One question still remains: Why did the Pope import from a distant past and the culture of the Middle Ages, the thesis that Islam spread by the sword; even though historical research, has proven its fallacy? What caused the Pope to bring up the subject? This remains the real question.”*

I was quite intrigued when I noticed, on the very day the article, **“Islam and the Sword”** appeared, that six readers responded almost immediately! Five disagreed with the author, and asserted that Islam did spread by the sword. One partially agreed with the thesis of the article, in so far as it described the *modus operandi* of the Prophet himself, but not of his successors (the caliphs) who did use the sword in the spread of Islam!

I quote some parts of the readers’ comments. The first one was very blunt and sarcastic.

*“The question we face is: why are our history books silent about the claim that Islam spread through argument, and preaching? In fact, all they relate refers to the armies that were raised during the Prophet’s days, the number of those who were killed, the camels and sheep that were won as spoils of war, and the number of women and children that were enslaved as part of the spoils of victory. They celebrate how, after the Prophet’s death, the Arab armies burst out of the Arabian Peninsula and began the military conquest of the East and the West.”*

Another writer asserted that in fact, **“Muslims have embraced their bloody history, and made it as a part of their religious faith.”**

*“I agree with the author of the article on some points, and disagree with him on others. After all, **“Tarikh is tarikh,”** (history is history) and if Muslims have committed their share of wrongs, why don’t they now apologize for them? After all, the Vatican has apologized for the Crusader Wars.*

*“Most Muslims are proud of their bloody history, and practice its philosophy in various degrees. The best Muslims still apply the articles of the decree of Umar\*\* vis-à-vis the Christian minorities living among them, such as placing severe restrictions on the building of churches; while in other Islamic countries church buildings are totally forbidden. Criticism of Christian doctrines is part and parcel of the Friday sermons; as well as the imprecations that are hurled against Christians and Jews during the same services. These curses are then followed by the worshippers’ Amen. As for those who want to leave Islam, the law of Apostasy goes into action, by either persecuting them, or eliminating them altogether.*

*“Non-Muslims and sometimes, even Shi’ites are called **Kafirs**. Non-Muslims are prohibited from spreading their faith in Islamic countries. Some Muslims would like to impose the Shari’a Law on both Muslims and Non-Muslims alike; while others are calling for reviving the Jizya tax on non-Muslims! Everything I have enumerated negates the claim that Islam has spread by convincing others to embrace it, and not rather by the sword.”*

A third respondent calling himself, a *Moderate Reader*, wrote:

*“I have one question to address to the author of the article: ‘how did Islam enter Egypt?’”*

In the fourth response, the writer must have read the Arabic text, but the comments were in English!

*“It is a fact that Islam spread only because of the fear of death by the sword. This fact is supported by all the nations that Islam subjugated to their rule. Even as we speak now, Christians who are living within Islam jurisdiction are suffering the most inhumane discrimination against them. Ask any Christian in Saudi Arabia. Ask the Christian Copts and they will tell you stories of abduction of their females and forcing them to convert to Islam. Read or ask the Christian Armenians and they will tell you about the extermination of over 2 million of them by Turkey’s Islam. I can go on for a very long shameful list of documented history of Islam’s spreading only because of the use of sword to terrorize people into conversion, but I think that is enough for now to convey the grim picture.”*

Here are excerpts from the fifth response:

*“The article was great, and those who commented on it thus far have made it even better. The subject is very important and requires clarification and transparency. I hope you will all bear with me as I make three points.*

*First, all the wars that involved the Prophet were defensive wars, and were not related to the spread of the message. He resorted to war only when he had to stop an attack, or lift a siege on a Muslim community.*

*Second, only one conquest occurred, that was the conquest of Mecca. It was necessary to lift the siege of the Infidels over the Holy Places in order to allow Muslims to fulfill the Haj.*

*Third, the Prophet sent letters to kings and rulers, asking them to embrace Islam. He never sent armies to force people to embrace Islam.*

*The question remains, however: Who began to spread Islam with the sword? It is those who came after the Prophet who decided to spread Islam by the sword, through the **futuh** (conquests.) Were they right or wrong? In my view, they were wrong.”*

The sixth comment was very critical of Islam.

*“The Prophet preached Islam in a wise and prudent manner for thirteen years in Mecca. Only from seventy to ninety people followed him. Then he concluded a pact with the people of Yathrib\*\*\*, and raised an army that conquered Mecca, forcing its people to*

*embrace Islam. More raids were undertaken in the Arabian Peninsula, to bring people into Islam. But no sooner than the Prophet had died, many tribes renounced Islam. Abu Bakr, (the first caliph,) fought them (in what is known as the Radda wars\*\*\*\*) forcing them to return to Islam. How then, did Islam spread?"*

## **Comments and Reflections**

Thanks to the Internet, Arabs are expressing themselves freely without any fear of persecution. The article of the Saudi columnist stands as a stark example of the flawed historiography of many Muslims. They keep on ignoring the incontrovertible facts of history, and chant the mantra that Islam did not spread primarily through the sword. And now that Pope Benedict XVI has raised the subject of the role of violence in Islam, the fallout continues, with many Muslims demanding an official apology!

One of the most ridiculous efforts, in the attempt to clear Islam's reputation, is the recourse of Muslim apologists to certain statements made by Western "scholars" or leaders, who have painted the history of Islam with rosy colors. So, our Saudi author referred to **Thomas Arnold's** assertion that Islam spread peacefully, and that its treatment of the conquered peoples was exemplary. The list of those Western apologists for Islam usually begins with **Napoleon**, and reaches down to the ex-Roman Catholic nun, **Karen Armstrong**. These so-called honest Westerners were either opportunistic, or simply naïve, but they end up as very dangerous propagandists for Islam.

In our days, we have also witnessed many attempts to falsify Islamic history, and to brainwash Western societies, through such PBS documentaries, as "**Islam: Empire of Faith**," and "**The Legacy of the Prophet**." It is a blatant lie to assert, as the Saudi writer did, that Islam has been tolerant of Christianity, when Christian guest workers in Saudi Arabia cannot even exercise their faith freely and privately, in the land they serve!

The topic, "**Islam and the Sword**" is not a purely academic one. It has to do with our life in the here and now. The ideology that has become part and parcel of Islam, and which has divided the world into "**Daru'l-Islam**," and "**Daru'l-Harb**" has invaded the West, through the presence of large numbers of Muslims in Europe and the Americas. Let me give one final illustration of the shadow of the sword that now hovers over our heads.

In January 2006, we celebrated the 250th Anniversary of the birth of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**. Celebrations went on for days at Salzburg, Austria, with thousands of Mozart's enthusiasts attending the events from all over the world. But would you believe it that now Muslim residents of Germany have just issued their veto against the performance of Mozart's opera, **Idomeneo**?!

On Monday, September 25, a dispatch from Berlin stated, "One of Germany's leading opera houses, **Deutsche Oper Berlin**, announced Monday that it was cancelling a controversial production because of the likelihood that it might offend Muslims. The original opera, **Idomeneo** by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, makes no reference to Islam, but director Hans Neuenfels introduced a scene to his production that depicts the decapitated heads of the Prophet Mohammed, Jesus Christ, the Buddha and the Greek

god Poseidon.”

Certainly, I am revolted and disgusted by the awful decision of director Hans Neuenfels, to add such a horrific scene, just to show his utter contempt for some leaders of world religions. Still the fact remains; it was not German Christians or Buddhists who might have resorted to violence in order to stop the controversial performance of **Idomeneo**. The cancellation of the performance took place because of threats violence coming from Muslim residents of Germany.

As mentioned in my previous article, [“Islamic Imperialism”: A Neglected Topic](#) posted on 23 September, I am thankful that the remarks of Pope Benedict XVI, have given rise to a serious and continuing discussion of the subject of Islam and its advocacy of violence in its attempt to dominate the world. It is my hope and prayer, that thinking men and women from within Islam, will rise to the occasion, and seek to bring about a true reformation of their faith. The Internet remains the only platform for such an honest and safe dialogue to bring about this long-awaited reform of Islam. The alternative for our world is too grim to contemplate!

**\*Da’wa**, an Arabic term that describes the Islamic practice of calling people to adopt Islam. A person who specializes in this activity is called a **Da’iya**.

**\*\*Umar** was the second caliph (634-644) who promulgated several laws regulating the lives of Dhimmis (Jews and Christians)

**\*\*\*Yathrib** was actually the name of the city that Muhammad sought as a refuge for his nascent Islamic umma. Its name, after the **Hijra**, in 622 AD, became **Medina**, i.e. city.

**\*\*\*\*Radda** is to go back on Islam, and to commit the sin of apostasy. An apostate is known in Arabic as a **Murtad**.