

“Islamic Imperialism”: A Neglected Topic

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Glancing over the comments that have appeared on the Arabic-language online media about the Pope’s lecture in Germany, I noticed most of them have been very critical. Western media, on both sides of the Atlantic, have dealt at length with the Pontiff’s words, and with some reactions coming from the Muslim world. What I intend to do in this article, is to draw attention to one major theme that occurs in almost all the Arab media, namely the constant harping on Western imperialistic goals, and the United States’ attempt to spread its imperialistic hegemony over the Islamic nations.

What is mostly glossed over by Arab and Muslim writers, even some who claim to be moderate, is that Islam was responsible for the rise of one of the greatest imperialistic ventures in the history of mankind. No other major world religion combined religion with politics, church and state, as Islam has done during the last 1400 years. And no other religion spread primarily through the sword, as Islam has done. In fact, Muslims glorify their early futuhat or conquests, claiming that they were accomplished with the approval of God, who has given Muslims the right to bring mankind under the rule of their religion. While charging the West of being imperialistic, Muslims ignore the fact that their imperialism has been unique, and produced lasting effects on those parts of the world they had occupied.

In order to illustrate my thesis, I would like to quote from the works of a British writer, **V. S. Naipaul**. Soon after the Islamic revolution in Iran, Naipaul visited Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. He met with people from all walks of life, and listened to them as they responded to his questions about the impact of their faith on their daily life. As a result of his research, and reflection on what he saw in those four Muslim countries, Random House, in New York, published his book, “**Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey,**” in 1982.

Reflecting on the impact of Islam on Iran, Naipaul wrote:

*“Islam in Iran was even more complicated. It was a divergence from the main belief; and this divergence had its roots in the political-racial dispute about the succession to the Prophet, who died in 632 A.D. **Islam, almost from the start, had been an imperialism as well as a religion, with an early history remarkably like a speeded-up version of the history of Rome, developing from city-state to peninsular overlord to empire, with corresponding stresses at every stage.**”*

P. 7, Emphasis is mine, JT

Almost two decades later, Naipaul re-visited these four Islamic countries, and managed to meet with some of the persons he had talked to in the 1970s. He produced a follow-up book, “**Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People.**” It was published by Random House in 1998

The author returned to the theme of his previous book, and pointed to the unique nature of Islamic imperialism, namely to cause “**the Converted People**” to forget their entire past, as if history began with the Islamic futuhat of their countries! In the Prologue, he wrote:

*“Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. **It makes imperial demands.***

***A convert’s worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story.** The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of the converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil.”* P. xi, Emphasis is mine, JT

And Indian writer, Ram Swarup, made some comments on these books of V. S. Naipaul, on a Hindu website, [Ram Swarup](#) I quote some pertinent ones that underline the utterly unique nature of the Islamic imperialism:

*“Naipaul finds Islamic fundamentalism at work wherever he goes: in Iran, in Pakistan, in Indonesia, in Malaysia. It has its stages and intensities, but there is one minimum requirement: **that the converts learn to lose regard for the land of their birth, reject their pagan neighbours and regard them along with women of inferior breed; that they hold their pre-Islamic past and ancestors in contempt.** The one unalterable principle is tabligh: that they give up their old identity in every thing, in their beliefs, customs, names, dress. But as one advances in piety, others things are added. There is demand for the enforcement of the sharia, introduction of Muslim penal laws like amputation of limbs, public lashing and stoning; introduction of Muslim rules of marriage and divorce, introduction of obligatory fasts and prayers. All this is often irksome to the believers and in the modern world sometimes also not always practical. This often invites opposition. Hence the need for the fundamentalists to capture state power and enforce Islamic laws, the need for whipping vans to see that men observe rules and regulations of prayer and fasting.*

*“Wherever Naipaul goes, he finds two features very prominent. **One is that the converts are trying to erase their past; the second is that though they were once victims of an aggression, they are now all for the aggressor, for the Arabs.** Whether in Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, their fundamental rage is against the past, against history, and all this accompanied with the ‘impossible dream of the true faith growing out of a spiritual vacancy’*

*“In Iran, he finds that things have gone pretty far, in fact too far. **Its pre-Islamic past is irrecoverable. It has lost all memory of its past and ancestors and is ashamed of them.***

It was once a great power that had challenged Greece and Rome. But it was defeated by the Arabs in AD 637, practically as soon as Islam began. It never made up for that defeat again. Naipaul says that in Iran 'people's consciousness began with the coming of Islam, began with that defeat. It gave a special edge to the faith in Iran, and a special passion to the people.' He adds that 'to be an Iranian was to have a special faith, a special version of the Arab faith.'

Emphasis is mine, JT

When I refer to the uniqueness of Islamic imperialism, I have in mind the fact that other imperialist powers like Britain and France did control many parts of the world, including Islamic areas. But when their empires came to an end; their former colonies had not been made over in the image of Britain or France. Even France, after having established a permanent foothold in Algeria that lasted more than 100 years, finally had to give up the attempt after a costly and bloody struggle. In contrast, Islam's grip on the lands they conquered, with the exception of Spain, Portugal, and lands in Central and Eastern Europe, has remained to this day.

It is not only V. S. Naipaul that has drawn attention to the basic imperialistic impulse within Islam, but recently **Ephraim Karsh**, Professor and Head of the Mediterranean Studies Programme, King's College, University of London, published, "**ISLAMIC IMPERIALISM: A HISTORY**" (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006)

I highly recommend this excellent study of a topic that is often forgotten, when Islam is being discussed in the public arena. Here are some quotes that will illustrate the plain truth about this religion, which is in fact, a religion wedded inextricably to a political worldview for the last 1400 years.

Writing in his Introduction, Professor Karsh contrasts Christianity and Islam, "*The worlds of Christianity and Islam, however, have developed differently in one fundamental respect. The Christian faith won over an existing empire in an extremely slow and painful process and its universalism was originally conceived in spiritual terms that made a clear distinction between God and Caesar. By the time it was embraced by the Byzantine emperors as a tool for buttressing their imperial claims, three centuries after its foundation, Christianity had in place a countervailing ecclesiastical institution with an abiding authority over the wills and actions of all believers. **The birth of Islam, by contrast, was inextricably linked with the creation of a world empire and its universalism was inherently imperialist.** It did not distinguish between temporal and religious powers, which were combined in the person of Muhammad, who derived his authority directly from Allah and acted at one and the same time as head of the state and head of the church. This allowed the prophet to cloak his political ambitions with a religious aura and to channel Islam's energies into 'its instruments of aggressive expansion, there [being] no internal organism of equal force to counterbalance it.'*" P. 5

While many Muslims continue to rail against Western imperialism, and especially against the United States, we must never forget some of the basic truths about Islam, as observed and commented on by V. S. Naipaul and Ephraim Karsh. These men have drawn our

attention to the inherently imperialistic nature of Islam. And now that Pope Benedict XVI has dealt, in his lecture at Regensburg, with a salient aspect of Islamic imperialism, namely its violent nature, we should thank him for precipitating this discussion on a global level.

I end my article by quoting from the **Epilogue** of Professor Karsh's book:

*“Contrary to widespread assumptions, these attacks, [reference here is to 9/11/2001] and for that matter Arab and Muslim, anti-Americanism, have little to do with US international behavior or its Middle Eastern policy. America's position as the pre-eminent world power blocks Arab and Islamic imperialist aspirations. As such, it is a natural target for aggression. Osama bin Laden and other Islamists's war is not against America per se, **but is rather the most recent manifestation of the millenarian jihad for a universal Islamic empire (or umma). This is a vision by no means confined to an extremist fringe in Islam, as illustrated by the overwhelming support for the 9/11 attacks throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds.**” P. 234*

Emphasis is mine, JT