

Western Dhimmitude

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By Jacob Thomas

Nowadays, some Western scholars who deal with Islam behave like *dhimmis*. This is in sharp contrast with those 19th century European scholars who produced works of lasting value on Islam that were marked by objectivity and genuine scholarship.

I feel constrained to deal with the phenomenon of “*Western Dhimmitude*” having listened recently to a video clip of an interview with the Director of the Reconciliation Program, at Yale Divinity School. It dealt with Pope Benedict’s quoting of a 14th century Byzantine Emperor who had made a critical remark about Muhammad. The interview, dated 15 September, 2006, can be accessed at http://www.yale.edu/divinity/video/cumming_msnbc.shtml

In order to refresh the memory of the readers, and to place the interview in its proper context, I quote from **Wikipedia**, the following information about the controversy.

“On September 12, 2006, while lecturing on ‘Faith, Reason and the University’ at the University of Regensburg, where he was formerly a professor, Pope Benedict quoted the opinion of Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, ‘Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.’ The Pope later explained that the remark was meant to compare early Muslim teaching on religious freedom with the later teaching on jihad, and was cited as part of a larger theological assertion, that ‘reason and faith go hand in hand, and that the concept of a holy war is always unreasonable, and against the nature of God, Muslim or Christian.’

“The Director of the Vatican press office, Federico Lombardi, explained the Pope's statement: ‘It was certainly not the intention of the Holy Father to undertake a comprehensive study of the jihad and of Muslim ideas on the subject, still less to offend the sensibilities of Muslim faithful. Quite the contrary, what emerges clearly from the Holy Father’s discourses is a warning, addressed to Western culture, to avoid ‘the contempt for God and the cynicism that considers mockery of the sacred to be an exercise of freedom.’

“There were public protests, including violent ones in the West Bank where two churches were firebombed, over his comments in various countries in the subsequent days. There has been a death threat on the Pope since the lecture from a group linked to Al Qaeda.”

Three days after the Pope’s remarks, Dr. Joseph Cumming, Director of the Reconciliation Program, at Yale Divinity School was interviewed by MSNBC.

The interviewer asked: *“Is it true that Islam was spread by the sword? Can that be said of any other religion?”*

The Director replied: *“Well, it is certainly true that all religious faiths and secular ideologies use religion to justify violence.”*

I thought I was listening to a politician who was obfuscating in his response, not wanting to go on record regarding the role of the sword in the history of Islam. The listeners to the television news channel needed to know whether Islam was spread by the sword or through peaceful means. A sincere question required an honest answer. To say, *“it is certainly true that all religious faiths and secular ideologies use religion to justify violence,”* was not an answer.

To begin with, I would like to offer a contrast between the first three hundred years in the histories of Christianity and Islam. From A.D. 1 until around 310, Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire. Jesus Christ was crucified during the rule of Pontius Pilate, the representative of Rome in Palestine. Peter and Paul, two leaders of the early Church were martyred during the reign of Emperor Nero. This mad ruler started the fire that burned Rome, blamed the Christians for it, and punished them with horrific acts of cruelty. Several waves of persecution followed during the second and third centuries; so that one of the Church Fathers coined the saying, *“The Blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”*

In contrast, Islam did spread by the sword. Muhammad’s work in Mecca was not successful. So he moved to Medina, where he assumed the position of prophet and ruler. He led military campaigns against the Meccan caravans, and eventually entered Mecca as a triumphant ruler. After his death in 632, his successors launched the *Futuh* (conquests) and managed to destroy the Persian Empire and parts of the Byzantine Empire. By 732, Muslims ruled lands stretching from India to Spain.

Furthermore, the response of Yale’s Director of its Reconciliation Program posited moral equivalence between Islam and the other major world religions. But history does not bear testimony to the veracity or accuracy of his claim. He should know better. I am not denying the fact that Christian nations were involved in building empires; and for centuries ruled many parts of the world. I grew up under French rule, attended French schools, and for some time, French was my primary language.

However, when we make judgments about religious faiths, we must begin by comparing the authoritative texts of these religions. **Christ and his apostles clearly taught the distinction between God and Caesar, Church and State.** Not so in Islam. From A. D. 622 (A. H. 1) **religion and politics, “church” and state, became intertwined and inseparable in Islam.**

At this point I would like to quote from my article, [“Islamic Imperialism”: A Neglected Topic](#) that appeared on the FFI website on 23 September, 2006. In that article I pointed to the fact that there was a *“basic imperialistic impulse within Islam.”* I quoted from a

book by Professor Ephraim Karsh, (Head of the Mediterranean Studies Programme, King's College, University of London,) **ISLAMIC IMPERIALISM: A HISTORY**. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006)

In his Introduction, Professor Karsh contrasted Christianity with 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*

In the **Epilogue** of Professor Karsh’s book, we read the following:

*“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*

To go back to the comments of the Director of the Reconciliation Program at Yale Divinity School, I ask: why didn’t he give a straight answer to the question of the interviewer? As a member of a theological and academic faculty, has he forgotten that language is meant to reveal and not conceal the truth?

As a descendent of *dhimmis* who endured 1300 years of humiliation and persecution from the hands of the Muslim conquerors of the Levant, I know what it is to lead a life of a *dhimmis*, and the necessity to watch one’s words when uttering anything about Islam or its founder. But why should some Western scholars, who have studied Arabic and Islam, behave like *dhimmis* and avoid telling the truth about Islamic imperialism?

What leads Westerners to engage in camouflaging the true nature of Islam? Perhaps, it is their eagerness to be seen as engaged in an attempt to reconcile the West with Islam. But should that reconciliation require a re-writing of the histories of all non-Islamic faiths,

while ignoring the fact that Islam has distinguished itself in the use of the sword in its expansion?

As long as Islam clings to the authority of the *Qur'an, Hadith, and the Sunna of the Prophet*, Islam remains as an exclusivist worldview. Its basic impulse or motif continues to be imperialistic. Its hegemony extends beyond the geographical sphere; as it appropriates the religious personages of the past from Adam to Jesus, by declaring them as proto-Muslims.

Islamic reconciliation with the rest of the world, will not take place thanks to the endeavors of some Western scholars' wishful thinking, but only when the Muslim world recognizes that the Medinan Surahs of the Qur'an (that harbor the *Ayat al-Sayf, the Sword Texts*) are no longer normative in our globalized world. Until that day, *Islam remains a religion of the word and the sword*. If you don't believe that, just glance at the flag of Saudi Arabia, with the words: *La Ilaha illa'llah, Muhammad Rasool Allah*, superimposed over two swords, and tell me what those symbols mean.