

Widening the Rift of Creeds

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Is September 11 a key to reinterpreting history? Two CBS “60 Minutes” programs of September 22 and of October 6 have just answered this question affirmatively. The first program said that those heroes who fought for freedom from colonial occupation in Algeria were “terrorists.” It was legitimate that they be tortured as this was an efficient way to “save innocent lives,” a view also propounded by Bruce Hoffman in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In the second program, Reverend Jerry Falwell even described the Prophet Mohamed as a “terrorist.”* Reverend Franklin Graham averred elsewhere that Islam is intolerant of other faiths.

To thus reinterpret history with September 11 as its key is fraught with dangers. By misrepresenting the past, it risks misunderstanding the contemporary world, pitting social groups against one another that previously were living in harmony: If the Prophet Mohamed was a “terrorist,” then all Muslims become fair game in the fight against terrorism. This is unfortunately how the Inquisition was launched by King Ferdinand in Medieval Spain with all the horrors that ensued against Muslims and Jews.

When Reverend Falwell calls the Prophet Mohamed a “terrorist,” he is doing exactly this. When Bruce Hoffman describes one of the heroes of the Battle of Algiers rising against foreign domination as “just another bin Laden,” he is doing exactly this. When the reporter in the “60 Minutes” program of September 22 justifies the torture inflicted by the war criminal General Aussaresses on the grounds that it brought “results” in terms of saving innocent lives, he is doing exactly this.

Three arguments refute these claims: First, the assumption is that since the attacks of September 11 in the United States and those against the French in Algeria more than 50 years ago were both carried out by non-state actors against official institutions, they are both acts of terrorism. For this to be the case, the official institutions themselves must be truly representative of the people. The French establishment in Algeria was not. Throughout history, oppressed peoples have risen against their oppressors whether local or foreign. Let us just pause and contemplate the hypothetical map of the world today if uprisings of peoples against officially institutionalized violence had all been crushed. It would be ugly.

Second, the reporter in the September 22 program considers, as did Aussaresses, that torture may be legitimate. “At least, in extreme circumstances,” Bruce Hoffman added, “in order to save lives.” Some lives may have been saved by torture among the occupying forces, but not so for Algerians who lost scores of theirs for each life saved in the ranks of their oppressors. Giving legitimacy to torture in this context is tantamount to giving a

* *Editor’s Note:* According to *The New York Times* of October 14, 2002, Reverend Falwell apologized for the remarks on October 12, 2002, saying he meant no disrespect to “any sincere law-abiding Muslim.”

different value to human life according to whether the victim is of European or of African extraction. Terrorism aims at trapping democracies into resorting to the expedients they themselves use that ultimately can negate basic human rights. If democracies let themselves be drawn down that slippery slope, then terrorism will have won.

Third, in times of crisis such as these when fear of insecurity may kindle extremist responses, it was good to see President Bush warn Americans against a witch hunt targeting Arabs and Muslims. "Islam is a faith based on love, not hate," he said. Yet, some opinion makers have followed another path: In Islamic countries as well as in the United States, zealots have indeed tried to ride on the present shock wave, to broaden the rift between Islamic and Christian cultures. Both have invoked a clash of civilizations to vilify the other culture and creed. That bin Laden should do so is no surprise, but that men of faith in this country do so is disappointing. Thus Reverend Falwell refers to the affinity between the peace-loving Moses and Jesus as opposed to the "terrorist" Prophet Mohammed. This rides roughshod on the dignity of Muslims. And the Prophet is known to have warned Muslims against "religious extremism [which] has brought disaster on those who came before you."

How can one oppose Moses and Jesus to Islam anyway when they are both given pride of place in the Koran?

Reverend Graham claims that Islam is intolerant of other faiths, based on the claim that the Koran refers to the right to kill "infidels." This verse refers to worshippers of idols who were attacking the young Muslim community in the 7th century, not to non-Muslims in general. To make such a claim is as if one took out of context the Bible's Psalm 137 on the Babylonians which says: "A blessing on him who takes and dashes your babies against the rock!" to conclude that Christians are cruel to babies. True faith is about reaching out across religions, not about vilifying them.