Ecumenical Intolerance

The sin of extremism is neither common to all Muslims nor limited to Islam.

PRESIDENT BUSH HAS stressed repeatedly that America's war on terrorism is not a war on Islam, which, he asserts, is a "religion of peace" perverted by fanatical extremists. But from the start dissenting voices have said that Islam itself poses a threat to Western civilization and that its inherently violent and oppressive nature was being whitewashed for the sake of political correctness.

One of the first salvos was fired by the Rev. Franklin Graham, who in October 2001 called Islam "a very evil and wicked religion." (He later insisted he was denouncing Islamic extremism, not all Muslims.) More recently, the Rev. Jerry Falwell told 60 *Minutes* that Islam's founder, Mohammed, was a "terrorist." Curiously, in this debate the defense of Islam is usually the province of secularist liberals, while the harshest criticism comes from religious ultraconservatives whose views sometimes overlap with those of Islamic fundamentalists.

In fact, the question "Is Islam a religion of peace or a religion of violence?" is virtually meaningless. Like any major faith, Islam has many faces.

The religion's critics argue that the Koran itself provides the foundation for bigotry and aggression toward non-Muslims, pointing to Mohammed's bloody wars against infidels. "In my opinion," Falwell told 60 *Minutes*, "Jesus set the example for love, as did Moses, and I think that Mohammed set an opposite example."

Yet as the religious scholar Alex Kronemer has pointed out, Mohammed was no bloodier a figure than Moses—and the Bible contains plenty of language no less violent than the Koran's. At one point, Moses takes the Israelites to task for sparing the women and children of a vanquished enemy tribe and instructs them to kill all the male children and all the women, except for virgins, who can be taken as slaves and concubines. Mosaic law also makes idolatry or the worship of other gods a capital offense, along with a host of other crimes, including adultery, cursing one's parents, and sodomy.

In his new book *The Name*, Graham writes, "Islam—unlike Christianity—has among its basic teachings a deep intolerance for those who follow other faiths." Yet the basic Christian teaching that salvation can be found only through Jesus Christ can surely be seen as a foundation for intolerance. Throughout history, people professing to follow Christ have killed, tortured, and persecuted countless men and women (most of them also Christians) in the sincere belief that they were not only protecting good Christians from the danger of being seduced by heresy but saving their victims' souls from eternal damnation.

While witch hunts and the persecution of heretics are generally associated with the Catholic Church, Protestantism does not have a stellar historical record either. Early Protestant leaders urged rulers to root out Catholicism in their domains, just as the popes urged Catholic princes to suppress Protestantism. In Calvin's 16th-century Geneva, even private practice of Catholic rites was punishable by expulsion from the city, attendance at sermons was mandatory, and the theological dissident Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for rejecting the doctrines of the Trinity and infant baptism.

Christian history is also marred by often brutal persecution of the Jews, including forced conversions. Indeed, it is a little-disputed fact that in the Middle Ages, Jews in Islamic countries, while relegated to second-class status, enjoyed far more toleration than in most

of Christendom. Virulent anti-Jewish bigotry can be found in the writings of major Christian figures. Luther's 1543 polemic *The Jews and Their Lies* urged Christian princes to rid their lands of the "abominable blasphemy" spread by Jews and "act like a good physician who, when gangrene has set in, proceeds without mercy to cut, saw, and burn flesh, veins, bone, and marrow." His advice included "to set fire to their synagogues," to destroy Jewish homes, to confiscate "all their prayer books and Talmudic writings," and to forbid rabbis to teach "on pain of loss of life and limb."

One legitimate counterpoint is that during the last 500 years mainstream Christianity has evolved to embrace tolerance and religious freedom. Lutheran churches, for instance, have formally repudiated Luther's anti-Semitic writings, whereas equally repellent anti-Jewish rhetoric is standard fare in much of the Arab press today.

But it is far from certain that this evolution was due to something inherent in Christian teachings rather than to other circumstances. While the split caused by the Reformation initially led to bloody religious wars, it was eventually recognized that some degree of tolerance was necessary to preserve civil peace. The secular ideals that arose from the Enlightenment also played a major role.

Meanwhile, church authorities often actively resisted religious liberty. The idea that individuals have the right to practice and preach whatever religion—let alone irreligion—they choose was denounced as dangerous lunacy by a succession of popes throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th. In 1953 Pope Pius XII stated that "error and false religions cannot be the object of a natural right." This stance did not change until 1965, with the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI's decree *Dignitatis Humanae*.

In an October 2001 essay in *The New York Times Magazine*, Andrew Sullivan, himself a Catholic, wrote, "It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to...terrorist temptation. If you believe that there is an eternal afterlife and that endless indescribable torture awaits those who disobey God's law, then it requires no huge stretch of imagi-

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nation to make sure that you not only conform to each diktat but that you also encourage and, if necessary, coerce others to do the same."

Not that religion should be singled out as *the* source of intolerance: The worst acts of individual or state-sponsored terrorism during the last 100 years were driven by aggressively secular ideologies that promised an earthly paradise. It's more accurate to say that every belief system that lays claim to the One Truth carries within it the seeds of violent intolerance.

Searching the texts of various faiths to discover which is the most inherently bellicose may be an interesting exercise, but what's relevant is whether there is something in Islamic culture today that encourages the spread of violent fanaticism. Some scholars who reject attempts to demonize Islam itself nonetheless agree that Al Qaeda–style terrorism is not a fringe phenomenon but a reflection of a dangerous and pervasive brand of Islamic extremism. Why this extremism has emerged is a complicated question that includes a mix of historical, social, economic, and religious factors.

The inescapable fact is that in many places around the globe Islam has been backsliding toward more rigid and intolerant orthodoxy, culminating in the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yet the same hatred of secularism and modernity that animates Muslim radicals, in a more moderate form, has also driven the rise of Christian religious fundamentalism in the West.

This is not to say that Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell would send young men to blow themselves up in discos or fly airplanes into buildings, or that the Southern Baptist Convention, which passed a resolution a few years ago urging wives to "submit graciously" to their husbands, wants to impose Talibanesque restrictions on women. But in their railings against sexual freedom, women's liberation, pornography, godlessness, and other purported evils of modernity, the two groups do mirror each other eerily.

After September 11, Falwell famously declared that "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America" had helped cause the attacks. The terrorists who actually carried them out might agree. ∎

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Foreign Intrigue
What explains the presidential urge to go global?

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES make many promises they don't intend to keep. The most frequent one is that they will resist the siren song of foreign adventure and focus on pocketbook issues. The image of a president vainly trying to avoid foreign policy trickery but eventually devoting more attention to international matters than to domestic well-being is so familiar that the motto of American diplomacy may be less Teddy Roosevelt's "Speak softly and carry a big stick" than Michael Corleone's "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!"

Every president in recent memory has come into office vowing to commit foreign policy only when absolutely necessary; every one has ended up making statecraft the centerpiece of his administration. Elected on that most domestic of rhetorical questions—"Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"—Ronald Reagan burnished his legend by cold-cocking communism and liberating Grenada's oppressed masses. George H.W. Bush came into office as the Education President but spent his tenure battling former clients Saddam Hussein and Manuel "Pineapple Face" Noriega. Capitalizing on Bush's homeland neglect, Bill Clinton gave us the phrase "It's the economy, stupid," then absurdly seemed to believe he would be remembered for peace breakthroughs in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and the Balkans.

George W. Bush is a kind of sum-mation of this trend. His campaign promised a "humble" foreign policy, and a large minority of voters deemed him fit for office despite—more likely, because of—his indifference to foreign affairs, famously signaled by an inability to name several heads of state. Yet apart from an early tax cut, he has done little beside foreign policy. He at least has a compelling reason for his foreign policy focus—though his plans, as of this writing, to prosecute a war on radical Islam by overthrowing the most secular government in the Middle East are questionable at the very least.

The temptation to lose oneself in diplomacy can't be explained by electoral calculations. Foreign policy has been conspicuously absent from voters' decision making for many years. Victory in the Persian Gulf didn't win Bush I a second term, nor did failure in Vietnam cost Richard Nixon the White House. Jimmy Carter produced fiascos in Iran and the controversial completion of the Panama Canal treaty, but he was done in by stagflation and the national malaise.

Lyndon Johnson's was the one recent presidency arguably wrecked by foreign events; but even there the actual war in Vietnam was less impor-tant than its stateside fallout, which overtook Johnson's domestic wars on poverty and abdominal scar tissue. With the raucous resistance to the war adding to the impression of a nation out of control, Nixon was elected more on the strength of his law-and-order candidacy than on his secret plan to end the conflict.

Nor can it be that foreign policy successes are easy to rack up. Even apparent triumphs in the Persian Gulf War and Afghanistan—not to mention countless doomed peace initiatives between the Israelis and the Palestinians—look less successful as time passes. As important, foreign policy usually occurs in a vacuum of public attention, its concepts and phrases—*nation building, détente, peace process*—as remote and ephemeral as jokes about Imelda Marcos' shoes.

So why does statecraft prove so alluring? Probably for all the reasons given above. Unlike, say, tax policy or crime prevention, foreign policy is one area where not knowing what you're doing is no barrier to entry. An amnesiac public assures that it's also largely a consequence-free game (quick: who's the current leader of Yugoslavia? Croatia? Bosnia-Herze-govina?). You can look presidential, secure in the knowledge that even your gravest errors will go unnoticed at home by all but the most commit-ted policy wonks.

Unless, of course, your diplomatic and intelligence failures allow attacks on New York and Washington that kill more than 3,000 people. In that case, you can always blame your predeces-sor or successor—whichever is more convenient. ∎

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