

Muslim Misogyny

A reaction to “Theater of Terror,” chapter 7 of Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 2000), 316 pp.

Douglas Hackleman

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Theater of Terror,” my assigned chapter from Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Terror In the Mind of God*, evidences the author’s competence to collect stories and to convey concise narratives that describe instances of terror understood as “performance violence,” often intended more to communicate than to meet a tactical military objective. And much of what Juergensmeyer explains you would come up with if you thought about it for very long: the terrorists are calculating fellows who consider the timing (some historic or ironic date), the location (a place that has historical or political significance), the mechanism (a vehicle on which you normally rely for safe transport)—symbolic performance violence used to multiply the impact of the message the events are intended to communicate. (I’m reminded of an interview I had with Tony Campolo nearly twenty years ago in which he expressed enthusiasm for “guerilla theatre” as a means to shake up the establishment (religious or secular) when he felt it needed a wakeup call.) Our author goes on to notice the obvious, that the global footprint of modern media multiply the impact of the vicious, staged acts of terror.

I might quibble with a Juergensmeyer reach, or what he makes of it: that “public ritual has traditionally been the province of religion, and this is one of the reasons that performance violence comes so naturally to activists from a religious background.” He supports Rappaport’s observation that “the two topics, terror and religion, fit together not only because there is a violent streak in the

history of religion, but also because terrorist acts have a symbolic side and in that sense mimic religious rites.” This is armchair stuff; speculation.

But other than suggesting one can say the same thing about political and governmental pomp and ceremony, I prefer to address some of what we have been making of our reading and discussion over the past several chapters and weeks.

Human nature is a subject that is unavoidably related to the never-ending anguish in the Middle East, but its makeup is rarely revisited.

I was speaking to a friend not long ago about the remarkable things we hear in this class—things (facts and reasoning) that sometimes beggar credulity. Apparently there is a belief among anthropologists that some ancient peoples self consciously, calculatingly introduced games or sports to redirect tendencies toward inter-tribal or inter-state aggression—war. I suppose in the same vein we moderns and post-moderns have the NFL and demolition derbies, boxing—and even fights where hockey games break out. No doubt this is why we were able to dodge doomsday with the former Soviet Union. And, conversely, it may explain why the Middle East is so perpetually at war with itself or others—they don’t have hockey, the NFL, the NHL or smash-mouth roller derbies.

Admirers of Sigmund Freud’s reductionistic assumptions about human nature have another explanation for why things are so continually edgy in the Holy Land; but Islam proscribes the licentious outlets for sex and aggression indulged by the

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infidels of Europe, the Americas and Australia. If only the nineteen hijackers of September 11 were not so sexually repressed, or were in a fight club; or (more neo-Freudian), could have projected their self-loathing in some more constructive manner.

But if Marx and me are right, in all cases it comes back to an innate “will to power.” There is always a percentage of individuals in any population who will use any means their imaginations and the moment require to land a deanship, drive a union, win a championship belt . . . or take a country.

“Imagine there’s no heaven,” John Lennon wrote.

A twentieth century utopian dream and a will to power led the former Soviet Union into a protracted nightmare from which, in the winter of 1932-33, millions of men, women and children never awoke. Terror by famine was inflicted on the collectivized peasants of the Ukraine and northern Caucasus by Joseph Stalin. Robert Conquest estimates that close to 20 million were starved to death. More millions survived to that living death known as the Gulag Archipelago. The ability of Stalin and the Soviet authorities to conceal or confuse the facts of these atrocities was aided and abetted by so many Westerners who for one reason or another wished to be deceived. Stalin hoped someday we’d join him, so the world “could live as one.”

“No hell below us, Above us only sky” (ibid)

Through self-study, he became well acquainted with the works of Darwin, Mill and Rousseau, before he ran out of money and went to work in a university library where two radical Marxists, with whom he later founded the Chinese Communist Party, befriended him. If the will to power had a poster boy, the Great Leader, Mao tse Tung is it. The story of his “long and winding road” (to stick with the *coleoptera*) would be inspiring, if it weren’t for the

tens of millions of lives he had to take* (or destroy) to supercede the collective farms of Stalin, and with his Great Leap Forward achieve, People’s Republic presses reported, agrarian reform unparalleled in human history. “It’s easy if you try.”

“You may say [he was] a dreamer” (ibid)

Saloth Sar was a dreamer who returned in 1953 with the will to power from three years at a university in France, where he became enamored of Communist ideology and determined to establish an agrarian utopia in his homeland. Better known today as Pol Pot, “with nothing to kill or die for” he brought the “killing fields” and a new beginning to Cambodia. Consequently, we can only “imagine all [his] people, Living life in peace.”

For sheer numbers and cruelty, the recent atheist attempts to create heaven on earth utterly overwhelm the ability of the imaginations of the decent to comprehend. And that may be why the implications of the facts are rejected—like a computer CD drive ejecting an unreadable DVD. The implications regarding the nature of human kind are too desolating; they leave the cognizant—especially the rational atheist—bereft of hope. And in line with so many of our Schumann Pavilion discussions, using reason and logic, I would join those who believe religion is the bane of humanity, on the condition we agree that Marxist materialism (or dialectic materialism) qualifies as an organized faith.

If I were to suggest any hope that might be salvaged from those twentieth century attempts to “immanentize the eschaton,” it would be that we can infer from their failure a central misunderstanding about the nature of humankind. But, against all hope, the misperception continues, and in the worst possible places: our centers of higher learning, the only true socialist workers paradise—where the

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tenured professors of America's elite universities are kept (like ladies of the evening) by the very capitalist alumni they regularly revile.

We can look back in profound judgment on the Crusades of a millennium past, and the lesser numbers do not decrease even slightly the individual horrors of each century's victims; and for the victims it matters nothing what imbalance, zeal or hatred inspired their suffering. But we do have—whether as Atheists, Agnostics or Christians—the advantage of perspective, and the attendant responsibility not to be beguiled by ideological fecklessness or shallow, dog-in-the-manger partisanship that leaves us committed to foolhardy positions.

Over the past couple of centuries, Western man willingly has boarded the greyhound of history only to be piloted by inebriated, reductionist ideologues—the bad bus drivers who have steered us drunkenly, from shoulder to shoulder. But it is human nature, again, that keeps men and women boarding the bus. And it is the nature of human kind—and the kind of intellectual impotence that can look but not see (or see but not comprehend)—that provoked Hegel's most famous and lapidary line about history: that we learn nothing from it.

It is human nature—again in the aggregate—that caused the blind (but blindingly insightful) seventeenth-century poet John Milton to write that humans “prefer bondage with ease to strenuous liberty.” Was Milton right? Or are the NeoCons correct? That is the confrontation that has faced so many in countless contexts across the centuries. Will we be freemen or slaves?

Prodigal progeny

Most of us have been the beneficiaries of a freedom acquired for us by mostly freedom and opportunity seeking Europeans who—despite their

many failings—left us an ethic, a form of government and a rule of law that we take mostly for granted. We have been coasting now, for more than half a century, on that spiritual and moral heritage; and, like prodigal progeny (archetypal ingrates, really), sneering and spitting on the core assumptions and institutions that make possible the freedoms and rights we thoughtlessly assume.

There were many in the sixties and seventies of the past century—and not just Neocons—who understood that human nature is immutable, and anticipated with varying specificity what would be the consequences of the Woodstock generation.

Envy

Envy and jealousy are as present today in the murderous hearts of Hamas, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda as they were in the heart of Cain for Abel. Envy was as real in the heart of Saddam Hussein for Kuwaiti oil as it was in the hearts of the two chimps who earlier this month savaged the couple who brought cake to one of their Animal Haven Ranch neighbors.

If the same bundle of genetic expression that lived as a hunter-gatherer four or five thousand years ago had lived instead in a crowded metropolis, he would have been a different person. His human nature would have reacted to a very different context. The same, normally circumspect woman may turn criminal in a mob or exhibitionist under alcohol and peer pressure.

The Dalton Baldwin (theologian and discussion group leader) who might enthusiastically throw tomatoes in support of a raucous protest for national healthcare, is the same man who so patiently (and sometimes interminably) explains how Ellen White reflected and spoke for the sensibilities of the small, and self-separating community of faith that first licked its pierced pride and fractured faith in the winter and spring of 1845.

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Envy, pride, fear, anger, larceny and mayhem; generosity, selflessness, humility, tenderness, courage and love are distributed within and among us in a rather precarious imbalance, mostly mutation free across the millennia. These stable and contradictory traits explain the painful paroxysms of history—the meaning of which we regularly hide from. These intractable bundles of self-absorbed contradictions explain why every memorandum of understanding, every accord and any league of nations (or United Nations) is foredoomed; and why every generation has to fight again the same battles between the savage and the civilized.

As we ponder any single immediate human political problem (particularly the third-millennium Middle East), it is time wasted to argue for any position that is not continually realistic about the basics of human nature—as individuals and groups. Call me pessimistic; but I have all of history and literature on my side. Discussion here or anywhere that is based on the assumption that human nature will change for the better, is, to quote the Bard, “sound and fury signifying nothing.”

Another method

Maybe it can be useful to apply the *assessment réalité* of what Malraux called *la condition humaine* to the present crisis. Rather than responding to 9/11 by asking what is common to those in the world who have perpetrated terror in the name of, or from a perspective of, or under the guise of, or who have associated with, or have used a slogan from, some religious heritage, I would review the history of the relationship between the Arab states and their non-Arab neighbors—before and after the Seventh century—with only one assumption: that the panoply of human evil and goodness are distributed fairly among all peoples, genetically speaking, and in

equal measure.

Under such a review, it soon becomes apparent that a thriving and civil culture—one that was making significant contributions to both the preserving and advancing of learning—hit a brick wall in the fourteenth century (or thereabouts) and regressed. The tenants of the region’s new faith—much of it acquired by force—required a detailed, formalized ritual life characterized by an overwhelming marginalization of women.

The Staggering Cost

Men in the aggregate—whether Arab, European, Pacific Rim, African, Latin, or Jew—will always be by nature porcine chauvinists. But the debilitating difference for Muslim women—and their men and their culture—is that Muslim misogyny is institutionalized.

Yes, sexism has dogged the West, to the great hurt of its women and its institutions; but in the Islamic world, the disenfranchisement (degradation?) of women is codified by law into every aspect of their legal and social fabric. And the swallowing depth of the consequences of that degradation for Islamic culture is difficult to plumb.

How many westerners—especially some of those who imagine themselves particularly sensitive to (and even champions of) women’s rights—have thought through and even begun to comprehend the extent to which this Muslim misogyny impoverishes Muslim culture, even (or especially) in the economic sphere?

How many of those who would prefer to blame European colonialism, or big oil, or American foreign policy or Haliburton for the condition of the Arab world, have really pondered the pivotal role that Muslim patriarchy plays in perennial Arab poverty? Time and space limits me to a few examples that illustrate the enormous disadvantage

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to which this places Islamic society in its ability to compete economically with neighbors who are not handicapped by this enormous moral and practical failing.

Imagine an American economy void of all the enormous efficiency that intelligent, underpaid executive assistants, clerical pools and office managers that are the foundation for so much of the entrepreneurial and corporate engine! Not to mention the more recent and obvious contributions to the marketplace of women like Helen Gurley Brown, Oprah Winfrey, Martha (free-again) Stewart, Andrea Jung (Avon CEO), Carly Fiorina (Hewlett Packard CEO) or Vivian Banta, head of Prudential Insurance Co. of America. They could not do any of what they do under Islamic rule.

Consider all the daily life tasks that the every-day American soccer mom regularly assumes. Imagine a world in which she is not allowed to leave the house unattended. Imagine—even if she was permitted to do all the things she normally does (even sign checks!)—imagine that she had to perform all those essential and demanding daily functions . . . dressed like a beekeeper?

Some of you who wring your hands about American healthcare should consider the crippling pox that Muslim misogyny puts on the delivery of their medical services. Women cannot be nurses—except to other women. Men cannot be physicians—except to that half of the population whose sex organs are external. It makes modern medical care next to impossible—unless you can play games with your own beliefs (and fool Allah) by hiring infidel women to nurse your patients.

The perpetual confiscation of agency from half of the Muslim population is a staggering, self-imposed economic impediment to Arab ascendancy. It is far

more expensive than the inconvenience to commerce that comes with the requirement to stop, elevate and direct one's cheeks westward, at the correct time, five times each day.

And sensitivity to my audience constrains me from spelling out the profound, unintended consequences of the segregated life for Muslim men. (To a lesser but real degree, many American men are being programmed toward a similar ineffectuality by some “cutting-edge” proposals from Western cultural architects. I'm reminded of George Gilder's experience a few years ago when he was excused from the Oprah Winfrey show, mid-segment, for proposing that, beyond the bearing and raising of children, another unique purpose of womankind was the civilizing of men.) Throughout much of the Muslim world infidel women are regarded as whores; and try to imagine a mature, healthy, inspiring, mutually affirming male-female relationship between a Muslim man and his arranged-for, child-bearing possession.

I try not to think about how depleted and colorless my life would be, if I had to associate almost continually with men. Or how much less interesting I would be (or how many more social functions I would miss) without the accomplished wife whose interpersonal warmth offsets to some degree my impoverished graces. (Having spent much of my growing up years in Southeast Asia, and as I learn more of Muslim culture, the more [not so much proud but] thankful I am to be an American.)

One very unnecessary reason that Muslim misogyny as an explanation for Arab failure to advance beyond the Third World is so little discussed is that the post-modern West is so hell-bent on not seeing differences of merit among cultures—even as it compulsively (oxymoronically) celebrates diversity.

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So to preempt myself and close this uncompromising essay, let me draw the conclusion of my own method of inquiry:

Given its self-imposed handicap, and given the grandiose and tenacious Muslim belief regarding Islam's rightful, glorious place in the world, all the accumulating resentment that reality's stark contrast imposes (that perpetual cognitive dissonance), the embarrassment posed by its obvious place in the world is consigned to an ever-expanding munitions' dump of envy. Islamic fundamentals are, of course, a bar too high, a bridge too far: to think you can achieve greatness (or that a decent deity would help you achieve it), even as you bind and bully the better half of your population.

Due to a globe reduced by efficient travel and the digital availability of most cultures to their counterparts, to a growing population of Allah's many children, the stark and unfavorable contrast has become increasingly obvious. And human nature being what it is, ineffectuality leads to envy; envy stewes into hatred, and three-and-a-half years ago the World Trade Center towers came down.

* Between 1949 and May 1965, the total number of Chinese killed by the Communists is estimated at 26,300,000. So astronomical is the extent of the massacres that the *Guinness Book of World Records* gives Mao and his Red Chinese first place in the section titled "Crime: Mass Killings." In July 1971, the U.S. Senate Committee of the Judiciary published the Walker Report. It put the total number of dead somewhere between 32,250,000 and 61,700,000.