

Carl W. Ernst

"Out of focus on Islam: A 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' approach spells trouble."

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The report of the 9/11 Commission has received much attention, particularly regarding its recommendations on restructuring the intelligence establishment. Little attention has been paid to the way the commission turned away from issues of international law and criminality, thus neglecting an opportunity for strengthening the global system of justice and policing. By focusing instead on a particular kind of terrorism defined as Islamic, this report unfortunately perpetuates a conflict mentality that may end up unintentionally causing further conflict.

The stereotyped language used by the Commission, postulating a "Muslim world" in opposition to "the West" is historically questionable and, what is worse, almost inevitably serves as a pretext for imposition of political and cultural domination. While most would applaud recommendations for supporting education in majority Muslim countries, we also need to recognize that imposition of European-language education and culture, often through missionary schools, has been a systematic adjunct of colonial policy pursued in almost every majority Muslim country over the past two centuries. If this new recommendation is not going to be an arrogant and one-sided globalizing mission, it must be recognized that communication is a two-way process, and that Europeans and Americans may have something to learn from Muslims from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. If the U.S. is indeed seriously engaged with majority Muslim countries for the long term, pursuing that relationship on the basis of knowledge is far preferable to the stereotypes and fears that currently dominate.

Beyond that major conceptual problem, it is also disturbing that the recommendations of this commission may end up formulating a "good Muslim/bad Muslim" policy for the United States. The analysis of the report concludes that "Usama Bin Ladin and other Islamist terrorist leaders draw on a long tradition of extreme intolerance within one stream of Islam (a minority tradition), from at least Ibn Taimiyyah, through the founders of Wahhabism, through the Muslim Brotherhood, to Sayyid Qutb." That is technically correct, but it is comparable to saying that Robespierre and the authors of the Terror of the French Revolution drew upon thinkers like Rousseau, Voltaire, and the Protestant Reformers. The problem with tracing this kind of genealogy, and then declaring war on the objectionable aspect of a particular religious or philosophical tradition, is that it then becomes the right of the state to decide which Islamic opinions are acceptable and which are not. There is no justification for a democratic government to embark upon a policy of deciding which religious opinions may or may not end up being used for violent purposes at some point. If that were true, there would be few Christian denominations that would be exempt from similar suspicion. This hasty analysis, which is already being widely replicated, is a simplistic caricature of the complex intellectual landscape of contemporary Islam. It dismisses the substantial contributions to public welfare by a "faith-based" organization like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (a group that long ago renounced violence), and the cogent critique of European colonialism by Sayyid Qutb (a man who never committed any violence and who was tortured and killed by a secular regime). A far more productive and defensible approach will focus not upon opinion but upon behavior that can be measured according to international standards of law and justice.

One of the other recommendations of the report is that the U.S. government should resolve "to treat people humanely, abide by the rule of law, and be generous and caring to our neighbors." There is much to admire in this sentiment. But the emphasis upon public relations and "getting our message across" will seem to be a hypocritical double standard as long as the basic human rights of Palestinians are denied. There seems to be little willingness on the part of American officials or journalists to state openly that Palestinians have basic human rights. The tacit position seems to be that violent actions by a small group of extremists justify the suspension of these rights for the entire Palestinian population. The continued application of the word terrorism only to nonstate groups will likewise appear to be a hypocritical whitewash of extraordinary oppression of the Palestinians by the Israeli state in the name of security, and much the same could be said of the Russian state in Chechnya, the repressive policies of the Uzbek government, etc. If the U.S. is to be taken seriously on human rights, there cannot be any double standards. Thus the advocacy of the rule of law, at a time when the U.S. government and a number of senators have rejected the recent ruling of the International Court Justice regarding the Israeli wall inside the West Bank, could end up being another hypocritical slogan, if it is not followed by consistent recognition of international law and human rights. Abusing the principles of justice in a preferential manner will only be seen as tyranny and imperialism.

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