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Anti-Religious Bigotry: Sharia

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 27, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Michelle Boorstein, in this morning?s Washington Post [1], has an important article about the way some activists and politicians have turned ?sharia? into a slur. Earlier, I noted [2] that Newt Gingrich had given a speech at the American Enterprise Institute in which he warned about ?the problem of creeping sharia.?

Boorstein catalogues other instances of people as different as a Tea Party organizer and Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes invoking sharia in a way that seems bigoted. For example, the Tea Party organizer, Geoff Ross, told Boorstein, ?I study the Koran. [How is his Arabic?] I study the Internet?if you take quotes from the Bible and compare them to the Koran, the Bible might say, ?Turn the other cheek,? while the Koran would say, ?Strike your enemies down and kill them.?? Perhaps Mr. Ross is unfamiliar with Psalm 137: ?Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks!? In short, any scripture written in a time of violence will reflect the violence of the times and, without proper context and interpretation can be used to besmirch the reputation of the entire religion. Somewhere in the Islamic world today, a terrorist recruiter is citing Psalm 137 the way Mr. Ross talks about the Koran.

Professor Pipes compares Islamic law to the U.S. Constitution, but is that the correct analogy? Would it not be better to compare sharia to parts of Leviticus, you know the ones that also recommend stoning a woman caught in adultery, forbidding the eating of shellfish, and wherein we find regulations for conduct towards immigrants: ?When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.? (Lev 19:33-34.) My guess is that passage is not going to be read at a Tez Party rally anytime soon?

Actually, there is an even better analogy for Pipes to make. Sharia is not like the U.S. Constitution, but its relationship to the Constitution should be exactly the same as the relationship of canon law to the Constitution. That is to say, Catholics are free to regulate their own ecclesiastical affairs through their own canonical traditions, but they cannot impose those canons on others. Pipes would also discover that there is a wide variety of debate within the Catholic Church about the way to interpret and apply canon law, just as there are Muslims who disagree about how to interpret and apply sharia.

Indeed, Pipes might also discover that canon law has been subjected to precisely the kind of bigoted attack that is currently launched against sharia, and that the attack on Catholic canon law has the distinction of having come from one of the most influential Founders: John Adams. In 1765, Adams published ?A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,? in which he wrote this:

?Since the promulgation of Christianity, the two greatest systems of tyranny that have sprung from this original, are the canon and the feudal law?the most refined, sublime, extensive, and astonishing constitution of policy that ever was conceived by the mind of man was framed by the Romish clergy for the aggrandizement of their own order. All the epithets I have here given to the Romish policy are just, and will be allowed to be so when it is considered, that they even persuaded mankind to believe, faithfully and undoubtingly, that God Almighty had

entrusted them with the keys of heaven, whose gates they might open and close at pleasure; with a power of dispensation over all the rules and obligations of morality; with authority to license all sorts of sins and crimes; with a power of deposing princes and absolving subjects from allegiance; with a power of procuring or withholding the rain of heaven and the beams of the sun; with the management of earthquakes, pestilence, and famine; nay, with the mysterious, awful, incomprehensible power of creating out of bread and wine the flesh and blood of God himself. All these opinions they were enabled to spread and rivet among the people by reducing their minds to a state of sordid ignorance and staring timidity, and by infusing into them a religious horror of letters and knowledge. Thus was human nature chained fast for ages in a cruel, shameful, and deplorable servitude to him, and his subordinate tyrants, who, it was foretold, would exalt himself above all that was called God, and that was worshipped.?

So, Professor Pipes can consult where and when he wishes, but Mr. Gingrich, who is now a Catholic, needs to do a little more research into the extensive anti-Catholic bigotry that was so much in the air the Founders were breathing and see if he does not detect a similarity between his own remarks on sharia and those of Adams on Catholic canon law. Anti-religious bigotry is anti-religious bigotry. Sometimes it takes Catholics as its target, sometimes Muslims. Anti-religious bigotry is always ugly. It is always at odds with the true spirit of the Founders and their commitment to religious tolerance. It is at odds, certainly with the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. And, sadly, it is as wildly popular as ever.

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