



Achilles' Heel

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Our Thought For The Day comes from Steve Centanni, the Fox News reporter freed over the weekend by his captors in Gaza:

"We were forced to convert to Islam at gunpoint. Don't get me wrong here. I have the highest respect for Islam, and I learned a lot of good things about it."

Before their release, Mr Centanni and his cameraman, Olaf Wiig, had appeared on camera in Islamic robes, sitting cross-legged, and had read from scripts announcing that they had become observant Muslims and asking Bush and Blair to do likewise. "Islam is not just meant for some people. It is the true religion for all people at all times," said Mr Centanni. "I changed my name to Khaled. I have embraced Islam and say the word Allah."

Earlier, his captors released a statement saying the two men had been offered a choice between a) conversion to Islam; b) the jizya (the tax paid by non-Muslims to their Muslim masters); or c) war. There was no none-of-the-above box. "They chose Islam," said the spokesperson for the group, "and that is a gift God gives whom He chooses" – even if circumstances occasionally oblige Him to give it to you down the barrel of a gun.

Just as there are rapists who tell themselves their victims are genuinely in love with them, so no doubt there are those who believe that faith can be enforced at the point of a sword. In one of the most indestructible examples of Islamostockholm Syndrome, the British journalist Yvonne Ridley was kidnapped in Afghanistan, converted to Islam, and has stayed converted: she was on Britain's Islam Channel the other

day pitching softball questions to the former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammed about his plans to destroy the United States.

But Centanni and Wiig's brief interlude as practicing Muslims is revealing in a larger sense. Ever since 9/11, the western multicultural mindset has been desperately trying to swaddle Islam within the fluffy quilt of diversity. It's "just" another religion, like the Congregationalists and Episcopalians. To be sure, it's got a few hotheads, but haven't we all? Sticking with this line requires an awful lot of brushing under the carpet and there's so much under there by now it looks like a broadloomed Himalayas. For a start, you can't help noticing the traffic is mostly one-way: In Dr. Mahathir's country, where a long English Common Law tradition is under sustained pressure from sharia, a lady called Lina Joy is currently enduring death threats and a long legal battle because she committed the "crime" of converting from Islam to Catholicism.

Well, that's Malaysia for you. But how about Michigan? Nazra Qurashi, a kindergarten teacher at a local Muslim school, wrote to The Lansing State Journal last month as follows:

"Islam is a guide for humanity, for all times, until the day of judgment. It is forbidden in Islam to convert to any other religion. The penalty is death. There is no disagreement about it. Islam is being embraced by people of other faiths all the time.

They should know they can embrace Islam, but cannot get out. This rule is not made by Muslims; it is the supreme law of God."

That seems clear enough, doesn't it? In 1951, Eric Hoffer, America's great longshoreman philosopher, wrote:

"The manner in which a mass movement starts out can also have an effect on the duration and mode of termination of the active phase of the movement."

Christians and Muslims are both "people of the book." But there's a difference: Christianity started out as a religion of the weak, held by the lowliest in society and advanced by conversion and example, independent of the state. A distinction between religion and temporal power is embedded in its founding narratives. Compare the final words of Jesus to his disciples, on the day of his ascension ...

"Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

... with the final words of Mohammed to his disciples:

"I was ordered to fight all men until they say, 'There is no god but Allah.'"

That's quite a difference. Christ is saying go to the remotest parts of the world and persuade others of what you know to be the truth. Mo-

ammed is saying fight all men until they submit to your truth: It's not a plan for converting an existing empire (as Christianity did) but for establishing a new empire. Islam was born and spread as a warrior's creed and, while that can be sedated, the intensity of anger of today's western Muslims suggests that the Mohammedan fighter endures at the heart of their faith, albeit significantly augmented by greater firepower. Oh, come on, you say, what about the Spanish Inquisition? Well, for one thing, the Inquisition killed fewer people in a century and a half than the jihad does in an average year. But, in the larger sense, it's easy to argue that, numbers aside, it was always an aberration and distortion of Christianity's roots. It's less clear that the jihad in its most violent form is a distortion of Mohammed's message. With Islam, it's the moderate variants of the Balkans, the Central Asian Stans and South Asia that are the aberration. And they're all now fading.

So, if you're pinning your hopes on Islamic reform, the difficulty is that most prominent Islamists are doing no more than Mohammedan karaoke. Here's Osama bin Laden during the post-9/11 Afghan campaign:

"I was ordered to fight the people until they say there is no god but Allah, and his prophet Mohammed."

It's hard to argue direct quotation is a "distortion" of the "religion of peace." The respective statements of Jesus and Mohammed are, to say the least, indicative of disposition.

The embrace of Christianity by the state power in Europe was the final stage in a process of pacific conversion. Whereas, at the height of its power in the eighth century, when the "Islamic world" stretched from Spain to India, its population was only minority Muslim, and it suited the Caliphate to keep it that way: fiscally speaking, a subordinate infidel population paying the jizya (the special tax for non-Muslims) was a critical component. Islam was less a proselytizing faith than a rationale for political authority. And today's jihad has far more in common with a conventional imperial regime than with any religious evangelizing.

Which means there's good news and bad news. The bad news is that Islam will soon be able to enforce submission-conversion at the point of a nuke. The good news is that any religion that needs to do that is, by definition, a weak one. More than that, the fierce faith of the 8th century Muslim warrior has been mostly replaced by a lot of hastily cobbled-together flimflam bought wholesale from clapped out European totalitarian pathologies. It would have struck almost any other ruler of Persia as absurd and unworthy to be as pitifully obsessed with Holocaust denial as President Ahmadinejad is: talk about a bad case of Europhile cultural cringe. But in today's mosques and madrasahs there is almost as little contemplation of the divine as there is in the typical Anglican sermon. The great Canadian columnist David Warren argues that Islam is desperately weak, that it has been "idi-

otized" by these obsolescent imports of mid-20th century Fascism. I'm not sure I'd go that far, but, if Washington had half the psy-ops spooks the

movies like to think we have, the spiritual neglect in latter-day Islam is a big Achilles' heel just ripe for exploiting.