

Of Condemnation and Divinity: Praying For our Religious Freedom

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August, 2002

Recently, Reverend Franklin Graham frankly expressed his views on Islam on Fox and PBS. He said that Islam was an evil and violent religion, and that the Qur'an itself calls for violence against non-Muslims. He also asserted his belief that the God of Islam is not the God of Christianity because the Muslim God is neither a Father nor a Son.

Except for his statement about Islam's rejection of the Trinitarian Doctrine of Christianity, Reverend Graham is wrong about Islam. Yet even in this case, his statement is significantly incomplete; for, it is important to add that Muslims do recognize Jesus and honor him as a major Prophet. The Qur'an describes him as the Word of God delivered to Mary (3:45; 4:171).

Reverend Graham states that the Qur'an encourages Muslims to kill non-Muslims (1). "You can read it for yourself," he says, "and these verses from the Qur'an are not taken out of context, it's there." (2) The emphasis on the verses being "there" does not of course validate the Reverend's claim. It also invites similar treatment of verses in the Bible. But "proof-texting," or the lifting of a verse from a text to make one's point has been roundly criticized by Christian and other religious scholars as well as academicians. It is distortive and subject to manipulation. Reverend Graham would not want this to happen to his sacred text, let alone have his faith publicly condemned based on such a suspect approach.

Further, as the revealed Word of God, a Being who is All-Knowing, Muslims believe that the Qur'an is internally consistent. Yet Reverend Graham's interpretation of a verse in the Qur'an provides a meaning which is inconsistent with both other verses in the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet. In particular, the Qur'an declares that:

"Those who believe in the Qur'an, and those who follow the Jewish scriptures, and the Christians and the Sabians, Any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (2:62)

Statistics show that American Muslims tend to be a family oriented, hard-working, and highly educated group. In other words, they are productive and upstanding members of this society. Yet, recently some of their co-citizens have been inclined to treat them as guilty by religious association. This behavior

strikes at the heart of our American constitutional liberties.

Let us not allow those who visited upon us the horrors of September 11th when they demolished the Twin Towers and parts of the Pentagon, break our spirit by alienating us from our time-tested American values and first principles. It was inexcusable even in the 17th century to have someone like Humphrey Prideaux speak disrespectfully of the Prophet; it is even less excusable that Americans today who have lived all their lives with our constitutional liberties condemn the religious beliefs of their co-citizens in similarly offensive terms. One would expect that by now our constitutional values and religious history would have become sufficiently entrenched in our psyche and society as to protect us from the tyranny of the majority and the folly of religious oppression.

Who better than the Baptists can understand this history? The travails of John Waller are well documented. The role of John Leland and other Baptists in securing the First Amendment is part of our history. Today, we ask Baptists in this country to support us in our travails and be good neighbors to us, for they have suffered religious persecution themselves. And whatever we may be, we are all God's children. Why fight over God when there is enough of him to go around?

The fear of future terrorist attacks resides in all of us. Our government tells us that another attack is certainly on the way. Our community has been on the alert about it, because in the end we will pay for any attack a double price as primary and secondary victims. So, Reverend Graham, please do not make life more difficult for us. It is neither Christian nor American.

Perhaps Jefferson's words can provide some comfort in this area:

"Let us not be uneasy then about the different roads we may pursue, as believing them the shortest, to that our last abode: but following the guidance of good conscience let us be happy in the hope that, by these different paths, we shall all meet in the end." (Letter to Miles King, 1814)

After all, Reverend Graham, both your God and our God, whether different or the same, believe in forgiveness. Who are we to close the doors of heaven and earth to those different from us?

We pray for you and forgive you, and ask God to help you open your heart to us.

1 For a theologically serious treatment of this charge see an excerpt from Jawdat Said's "Law, Religion and the Prophetic Tradition," *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. XV (2000-2001); and synopsis of David Dakake's paper *Combating the Myth of Militant Islam* (forthcoming) at <www.karamah.org>.

2 All quotes are from the interview by Kim Lawton, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, week of August 9, 2000, at <www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week549/news.html>