



Unskewing Skewed Logic

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February, 2010

There's a piece surfing the Internet under the by-line of 'Emanuel Tanay, M.D.' entitled, 'A German's View of Islam.' Apart from the opening quotation about the average German and Nazism, there's nothing very German about it. The author is Paul E. Marek, who published the essay in 2007 under the title, "Why the Peaceful Majority is Irrelevant." -- www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/6996 Tanay himself, a Polish Holocaust survivor living in Ann Arbor, Michigan (USA), denies authorship. Marek is a second-generation Canadian of Czech descent, is an educational consultant. Tanay's signature on the chain-letter email version is a forgery although why it was forged makes no sense. Nonetheless, we can set it aside.

Marek's original piece begins with an interesting comment by a friend of his, a German aristocrat, whom he asked, 'How many German people were true Nazis?' The answer was, 'Very few.' Some appreciated the restoration of German national pride (and probed no deeper), others just didn't care (they were too busy), while still others (the respondent himself among them) disdained the Nazis as fools and so ignored them. And, the German concluded, 'Before we knew it, they owned us.'

Marek then proceeds to cite case after parallel case in which ordinary people in country after country, like the Germans, were seduced or cudgeled by fanatics into submitting to terrorism and tyranny, unwittingly becoming complicit in atrocity after atrocity along the way. All these simple peace-loving people ignored the threat too long, didn't resist when they had the chance and wound up victims. The 'peaceful majority' of Muslims, Marek suggests, are like the Germans too. The fanatics have taken them over, rendered them irrelevant, and '... they will awaken one day and find that the fanatics own them, and the end of their world will have begun.'

In the genre of Islam-bashing, this piece is remarkable for seeming rational. To illustrate the Muslim dilemma Marek argues, 'This is *like* that, therefore this *is* that.' And the parallelism that inspires is the historian's bugbear, seductive because it's so tidy. But what seems to be 'like' in the contemporary Muslim case is actually quite unique, a sticky and sickly cocktail of clashing features. To draw the conclusion that Islamist fanaticism is the true 'likeness' of what happened elsewhere and other-when is false. The facts won't allow it and the skewed logic won't paper them over. Each case Marek cites was homegrown in its own environment — Nazism was German-bred, Bolshevism was intrinsically Russian, Maoism was undeniably Chinese, the 20th century Samurais were inimitably Japanese, and the Hutus of Rwanda were very Rwandan ... all homegrown. This simply isn't the case with contemporary Islamist fanaticism. Islamist fanaticism is *not* very Muslim. The parallelism just won't hold. The likeness isn't 'like' at all; Islamist fanaticism is its own anomaly, and addressing it requires some adroit improvisation and courageous truth speaking.

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The larger Muslim community does face a mind-boggling challenge and, thus far, it hasn't come up with appropriate or effectively energetic responses to the sudden appearance of a hybrid and anomalous fanaticism in its midst. There's a lot of frantic (almost comic) denial going on and mass confusion. One aspect of the problem is that insightful Muslim analysis remains pretty much an elite in-house exercise. Even so, fanatics are losing ground with the average person on the prayer carpet (so to speak ... Muslims don't use pews). By and large, Muslims are becoming fed up with their irrationally hyped-up young men and women and the cynicism of their backroom handlers. A grassroots reaction has set in and it's growing, but progress is slow, irregular and fitful for a variety of reasons over which Muslims have no control. Among these is the crucial element of airtime. The commercial media don't air the 'good stuff'. It's just not interesting. What they *do* air is gore and the venomous vituperations of bloody-minded mullahs. Who wants to listen to a quiet voice preaching sense and peace when you've got all that horror and hate-stuff in the pipeline? After all, that's where the money is; that's what audiences gobble up.

So when Marek berates Muslim moderates for not speaking out, he's not entirely to blame. He can't hear their voices nor can he see those patient and devout people in mosques and meeting halls who engage young Muslims in a pragmatic non-violent understanding of Islam's vitality in daily life. Marek (along with many others) lives in his own 'yellow submarine', deaf and blind to reality. This is a real frustration. The extremists seem to be having it all their own way. Terrorism and fanaticism are 99% communications, and the fanatics have learned the technique of the 'sound-bite' very well indeed. They've had good teachers. Their message blares out over the airwaves and the Internet. There is such a thing as professional fanaticism, a skill to contrive, to manage and to publicize exotically irrational violent behavior.

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Forty years ago it was widely touted in western circles that conservative Islam was the weapon of choice against the advance of Communism especially in the Third World. When I worked in the Ford Foundation's Middle East office in the early '70s it was just accepted dogma that 'Islam is immune to Communism'. It was about that time that, to prove the point, the US and Saudi Arabia conspired to plant *madrasah* paramilitary training networks wherever leftist regimes emerged in the Muslim world. Apart from the then-soft target of Afghanistan, other countries included Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, countries of Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Somalia, etc.), and Pakistan during the incumbency of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The Saudis had the gall to call this undertaking 'foreign aid', and they got away with it until the late President Julius Nyerere showed them up for what they were and threw them out of his Tanzania. Then the UN finally cottoned on and rejected the subterfuge.

Spoon-fed into impressionable young minds in this network was a hybrid between Wahhabi fundamentalist ideology and an exploitative western political agenda and paramilitary strategy. It started with playing upon an imbedded Islamic self-doubt and, its own professional fanatics in place, graduated into harnessing the holy energy of collective insanity. It proved explosive especially once that network became self-replicating, incorporating and 'islamizing' blatantly alien strategies developed by Baader-Meinhof in Germany and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and choosing its own targets, among them its own erstwhile western sponsors.

In Pakistan the graduates (students or *talibân*) were to great effect mobilized and launched against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Even Bin Lâdin got on that bandwagon. With CIA funding and training he firmly establish his foothold in Afghanistan. Both the Talibân and al-Qâ'idah are latter generation Cold War creations. The Israelis got in on the act, creating Hamâs and Islamic Jihâd as counters to the PLO's Palestinian nationalism. (The whole enterprise has now backfired, of course.)

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Like they did in Vietnam after World War II, America's Cold Warriors seemed unable to take on board that the so-called leftists of the Third World were, in fact, pragmatists. They were not driven by ideology so much as by the dream of self-determination. They fought colonialism and imperialism; they fought for life, liberty and human dignity (the 'pursuit of happiness'). Mesmerized by our own Cold War paranoid propaganda, in the post-imperial age we Americans lost sight of the fact that these were the very objectives our own revolution espoused. Emerging from World War II as the Free World's muscleman pumped up by steroids of power, we accepted Anthony Eden's elegantly phrased but fraught invitation to grasp the imperial baton that Britain was handing off. Almost casually we Americans, once Britain's nemesis, trashed our ancestral values, sowed the wind, and now we reap the whirlwind. It's no surprise that American foreign policy is almost fated to be brutally off target and quite blind. Even 'Yes-We-Can!' Obama is not free of that self-denying distortion.

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We've already dealt with the bizarre hybrid of Islamist fanaticism and its putative Muslim roots. Two other factors remain: the options for a Muslim consensus and the increasing role and the creative frustration of the Muslim 'diaspora'.

Bluntly put, there is really no reliable mechanism for generating a Muslim consensus across the sprawling so-called-Muslim World. There's too much diversity. Muslims have no concrete focal point, political symbol, authority figure or governing body. The refrain in the Book of Judges echoes: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes." (17:6 and elsewhere) Any Muslim who claims religious credentials, even Bin Lâdin himself (who has no credentials at all), may declaim on any subject whatsoever. It's chaos on the Internet. And that gives fanatics an opening wedge. If people go along with them, they say, they'll restore coherence. Preposterous! They're at the very core of the chaos they intended to create. Chaos-driven, they've no credible program. There's just no consensus-generating vehicle available at the moment and not for the foreseeable future.

The Muslim 'diaspora' is more interesting. On the one hand, western Muslims were shocked after 9/11 by how suddenly they became the western world's pariahs. They've found themselves increasingly boxed in by arbitrary strictures — strictures upon how they may slaughter their meat (in the US), upon how their women may dress (in France), upon how their places of worship may be built (in Switzerland), and any number of obvious violations of their human and religious rights, including racial and religious profiling by security agencies. On the one hand, they revel in their freedoms in western democracies; on the other, they are brought up short when a deluded Danish cartoonist mocks their Prophet as a comical terrorist with a bomb in his turban and they find no legal redress for the slander.

Muslim immigrants in the West, particularly the first generation, are really fish out of water. But the second and third generations are different. By and large they're 'at home' in Dearborn, LA or New York, in Birmingham, Manchester or London, in Paris, Amsterdam or Berlin. They speak the language idiomatically. In most countries they no longer even stand out racially. They successfully stand for public office. In many cases they've adjusted their names to fit their environment (Haddâd translates into Smith) or, where they've kept them, the pronunciation has been so 'indigenized' that they themselves no longer pronounce them correctly (Sha'nîn becomes Shannon — a Lebanese Irishman forsooth).

It is among these very interesting, enterprising and surprising people that we hear new voices that influence the increasingly cosmopolitan worldwide Muslim community. And something of a grassroots reformation is starting to gather steam.

But the shock of post-9/11 stigmatization has had a damaging impact upon this reformation-in-the-bud. Some individuals seek roots elsewhere and want to exact some form of retribution. There's Major Nadal Hasan and the Fort Hood horror. His murderous rampage can't be justified but we must try to understand it. While the elements of reformation are to be found in most of the Muslim 'diaspora', it is at that cutting edge that the Muslim community is the most fragile. Major Hasan is a case in point of just how fragile things can be. Similar cases of psychological 'breakage' have also popped up in Britain and other countries in Europe. While Marek's parallelism doesn't fit the real scenario, he is right to suggest that we are at a crucial juncture in the evolution of the contemporary Muslim community.

The problem of Islamist fanaticism isn't so simple. Marek, with his skewed logic, argues that 'This is *like* that, therefore this *is* that.' No, it isn't. It just isn't! The onus can't be simply laid at the door of the peaceful majority of Muslims whom he writes off as irrelevant. Yes, the distortion I call 'Islamist fanaticism' (because it's *Muslim-like* but not *really* Muslim) needs fixing, and Muslims must do the grunt work to fix it. After all, by-blow though it is, Islamist fanaticism does claim paternity rights. But onus lies just as heavily (if not more so) upon the West, and upon the US and Israel in particular. There's a paternity suit pending there too. Their heavy (and controlling) hand in creating the monster requires they aid in taming it.

That begins, of course, not with violence-in-kind. Violence only confirms the fanatics' basic assumptions, and feeds into the reverberating system. Instead it begins with an admission of accountability ... even *culpability*. The task needs tough love, understanding in big doses, an affirmation of universal human dignity, a hearty confession of sin for having violated that dignity, and a lot of heartfelt compassion across the board. It's not just the peaceful Muslim majority that's at risk. We're *all* at risk for bearing false witness and for not speaking the truth especially to ourselves when we had the chance to do so. We could *all* wind up prisoners of the fanaticisms we've spawned, be they falsely branded as 'Muslim' or 'Christian' or 'Jewish'.

So, let's get on with unskewing the logic we've skewed, and start making sense instead. It's not too late ... but time is, indeed, wasting away. We *do* need to get on with it, and now is as good a time as any. In fact *now is the only time we've got!*

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.