# ARE MUSLIMS BARBARIANS?

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As a trained sociologist, my academic experience leans heavily towards nurture-based explanations of human behavior. But a lot of social science scholarship has evolved since I received my doctorate in sociology from New York University in 1980, and much of it shows that nature-based explanations have been too easily dismissed. No matter which side has the better argument, it is still considered impolitic to ask whether a given negative group characteristic is more a function of nature or nurture. So the tough questions never get asked.

It is indisputably true that when Catholics, Protestants and Jews are offended by something that they find disagreeable—even obscene—they almost never take to the streets killing innocent persons; nor do they make pledges of violence. To be sure, there are occasional nuts who blow up buildings in the name of God, but one is hard pressed to find examples where offensive speech is greeted with widespread violence. However, this is not true of Muslims, as every honest person knows.

Which raises the question: Why do so many Muslims react violently to non-violence? Is it in their genes? No, of course not: only someone who is totally deranged would believe Muslims are congenitally violent. So is it nurture? And if so, is it the religion—Islam—that is corrupt? Or is it the teachers who pervert the teachings of Islam and indoctrinate young people with false ideas? Or is it the students who for some reason cannot embrace the noble teachings of Islam?

I raised these questions with Imus, the iconic radio personality whose show is simulcast on MSNBC. Not being an Islamic scholar, it is hard for me to say whether there is something inherently wrong with the religion or whether those

who teach it are the guilty party (the students can hardly be blamed for what they're taught).

But two things are certain: on the one hand, sweeping generalizations that damn all Muslims as barbarians are expressions of bigotry; on the other hand, it is undeniably true that there is something really screwed up in the Muslim world about the way their religion is being received. It is up to Muslims to fix what's wrong, and they had better move with dispatch. Regrettably, there are not enough signs that this is happening.

If there is one thing that cannot be tolerated, it's this business of scapegoating people like the pope for the barbaric reaction of some Muslims. When people are upset about something they've heard about, the rational response is not violence, or pledges of violence, but discourse. Speech that is found offensive should not be tolerated, but it should be answered in kind and not occasion violence. This is so basic that it is embarrassing to even point it out, but that's where we're at today.

Almost as bad as machete-wielding Muslims are those non-Muslims who refuse to condemn Muslim incivility. At bottom, they're cowards. Or, worse still, they're bigots. Cowardice is at work when fear buries ethics, or when the understandable human impulse to protect oneself becomes absolute, squashing all competing values. Bad as this is, it is certainly preferable to the bigotry that allows well-educated Christians and Jews to focus on the "root causes" of Muslim violence, all the while remaining deadly silent during the onslaught.

There are plenty of educated white racists who never stop making excuses for miscreant blacks, and that's because deep down these condescending whites think that blacks are incapable of doing better. Similarly, when violent Muslims are not held responsible for their behavior, it sends a "that's the way they are" message that enables more misbehavior. In

other words, failure gets a pass because those who fail are losers.

It is precisely this kind of uppity response that feeds the problem. Unless everyone is held to the same standards of accountability, we'll never make any progress. Unfortunately, we're so inebriated with multicultural moonshine that we can't seem to think straight. We'd like to think that all cultures are equal, yet it is painfully obvious that those cultures grounded in the Judeo-Christian ethos do not put bad guys into human shredders or throw gays out of high-rise buildings.

Muslims say they take offense when someone mistreats their religion, yet when earlier this year the Saudi government bulldozed the house that Muhammad lived in for 28 years, where was the outcry among Muslims? Had a stray U.S. bomb hit the same target, there would have been mayhem. In short, what seems to matter is the identity of the transgressor, not the nature of the transgression.If Islam is not the problem, then we need to know why so many millions of Muslims the world over are acting as if it is. And if the problem lay in a profound misinterpretation of Islam, then we need to know why this bastardization of their religion has been allowed to take place and when the remedial education is going to begin.