



Are Muslims the New Nazis?

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Recently I heard a comedian suggest that “brown is the new black”, that brown people (aka those of Middle Eastern/Asian descent) now receive the abuse, discrimination and suspicion that black people faced in the past. While he was speaking largely of the North American experience, I wonder if in a more global setting it is true that Muslims are the new Nazis. In some circles is the word “Muslim” held with the same contempt as the word “Nazi” was 65 years ago?

It would appear that since 9/11, Muslims are the favorite designees of the “AntiChrist” label American evangelicals are fond of updating. With increasing frequency and volume, and coming largely from conservative corners, there is a response to 9/11 and its aftermath that makes Muslims out to be Public Enemy #1.

Because the “real” Islam is not monolithic and cannot “stand up” as it were, these debates over its soul will likely continue unabated and with little consensus. Perhaps a more fruitful discussion can be had, not about the “real” Islam (what is the “real” Christianity?), but about our response to enemies in general. As can be seen above, the exact identity of our perceived enemies changes over time, while our biblical response to them, whoever they are, should not.

Human beings have always known that there is nothing like a good enemy to unite a fractured, divided people or nation. Every war needs a good propaganda machine pointing out the inhuman characteristics of the enemy. Every action/drama movie needs a good villain to capture the audience. Every story needs a good antagonist to secure a memorable plot. Our desire for justice, our desire to see the wicked get their

due, unites us with the protagonist in his/her quest for the common good.

Enter Jesus with His characteristic refusal to be sucked into surface-level sides of a conflict, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also....You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Mt. 5:38-39, 43-46).” Once again, Jesus meddles with us.

Here are two illustrative stories of the differing motivations that conflict us with regard to loving our enemies. In Ken Burns’ 2007 documentary on World War II, simply entitled *The War*, reference is made to the difficulty American young men had in learning how to kill another human being. One man reflects on how this internal struggle ended when he saw the corpse of an American soldier who had been killed and mutilated by the Japanese. “From then on”, he said, “I had no trouble killing Japs.” Contrast this with the story I heard at a recent memorial service for the late Dr. Arthur Glasser, who served with distinction as the Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. During World War II Glasser was a Marine chaplain and tells of storming a beach on an island in the South Pacific. He saw a dead Japanese soldier with a book lying next to him. Curious, he went to see what the book was, and was surprised to pick up a Japanese

New Testament. He thought, “My God, we’ve killed our brother.” I can identify with both motivations represented in these two human experiences. The labels of “enemy” and “brother” are not as easily determined as one might think.

Well, you might say, I am comparing apples and oranges because in the first story the Japanese soldier was not a believer and in the second story he was. However, that only brings us to the same situation Jesus doesn’t allow: “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Mt. 5:46). We are not called to love only those Muslims who reject violence and fundamentalism; we are called to love all Muslims everywhere – bar none. This brings up the most difficult aspect of this topic – how do we love those, Muslim or otherwise, who are evil or wicked?

The quotes from the Bible given above seem straightforward enough, but everything changes when Christians get power. When Jesus said “Love your enemies,” he was talking to people who didn’t have a whole lot of choice in the matter. Sure, they could rebel (and they did), but it was always short-lived and futile in the wake of Roman retribution. American Christians today stand in a very different situation than did Jesus or Paul. Power changes love, somehow seducing it by reminding us what we have to lose. And when love has something to lose, it wavers. The love of Jesus is unhindered, unwavering, exuberant. I don’t know if brown is the new black or if Muslims are the new Nazis. But I do know that there is no “new love” to offer our enemies in this world. The old one, demonstrated so well by Jesus, works just fine, and remains the only answer, albeit a disturbing one, to this perplexing question. ¶