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## *“Islam: Empire of Faith”*

*Program aired on public television*

*May 8, 2001, 8-10:30 p.m. (Chicago, WTTW)*



*Bassam Madany*

At first hearing the very concept of “theology” sounds grotesque. How can man (male and female) study God? How can God allow himself to become the object of human scrutiny and evaluation? In his relation to us is he not subject rather than object? So how can creatures investigate their Creator, the clay the potter, the finite the Infinite, and sinners the Holy One? The very idea is as brash as the alleged (though apocryphal?) letter of a school girl to the Church of England Enquiry Office. “Dear Sir,” she wrote: “We are doing God this term. Please send full particulars.”

Yet “theology,” whatever its etymology may seem to suggest, does not necessarily have any inappropriately arrogant overtones. For God in Christ has deliberately presented himself to us, in our space-time existence, and has invited us to apprehend him by our three higher senses, by sight, hearing and touch (1 John 1:1).

JOHN R. W. STOTT  
“THEOLOGY” A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DISCIPLINE”  
DOING THEOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD (1996)

There is much stormy weather ahead. Only the hardiest may survive. Modernity is a winter season for classical Christianity. Spring will come, but only to those who have survived the storm.

THOMAS C. ODEN  
AFTER MODERNITY . . . WHAT? (1990)

In his foreword to Bat Ye’or’s book, *The Decline of Christianity Under Islam: from Jihad to Dhimmitude*, Jacques Ellul was concerned about what he called the “Dhimmitude of the West.” He was referring to those Western writers and intellectuals who would adopt self-censorship when dealing with Islam. Such a behavior is similar to that of the Jews and Christians who came under Islam in its early days. The conquering Arab Muslims called them, *Dhimmi*. This status conferred upon them the freedom to practice their religion on the condition that they refrain from any criticism of Islam. Furthermore, they were not allowed to propagate their faith; and once a *Dhimmi* embraced Islam, he could no longer go back to his former faith. Apostasy was punishable by death.

I could not help thinking of these words of the late French Protestant scholar when viewing a Public Television production, “Islam: Empire of Faith.” The majority of the speakers and commentators are Western, and are associated with such institutions as the Saint Louis University, Columbia University, Boston College, and Edinburgh University. At several intermissions during the two-and-a-half-hour show, we were informed that the documentary was being made available “through viewers like you.” I doubt the veracity of this statement. How could such a lengthy program, that took us to

three continents, covered more than a millennium of world history, showing the viewers a multitude of people in movement, as well as great architectural monuments, have been realized through the mere contributions of viewers?

At this point, someone may question whether I am eligible to undertake a review of "Islam: Empire of Faith." After all, I am an Eastern Christian. How could I be free from the prejudices that my people have harbored regarding Islam ever since the conquest of their homeland in the early seventh century? I admit that I am not entirely free from some bias. But it is not a bias that has no legitimate and reasonable foundation. Furthermore, I do have the credentials to make an assessment of this documentary. I lived a good deal of my life in the Middle East. I experienced some of the great upheavals that took place in that area in the aftermath of World War II. Even after moving to North America, I kept up my studies of the history of the Arabs and of Islam, both in Arabic and in English. My credentials are just as valid as those of the speakers who contributed their comments on "Islam: Empire of Faith."

As the show proceeded, I felt I was watching a thoroughly revisionist history of the Middle East since the rise of Islam. I have read Arabic books written by Muslim scholars and intellectuals that were far more objective than what I was watching. Western scholars seldom show such an attitude toward Christianity. Just three weeks prior to the airing of this program, the same public television station (Channel 11 in Chicago) aired on Easter Eve a program in which one journalist opined that, "we are not sure whether Jesus Christ was a historical person." Could there have been anything more shocking than casting doubts about the historicity of the person of Jesus Christ, just a few hours before Christians were to celebrate the resurrection of their Lord and Savior?

The airing of "Islam: Empire of Faith" had hardly begun before we were told that one-fourth of mankind were followers of Islam. This is a preposterous claim. The world population today is around six billion. The Muslim world has, at most, one billion adherents. Therefore, the ratio is one sixth of the world is Muslim. That inflated number alerted me right

away that I was watching a propaganda piece.

When dealing with the experience of Muhammad in a cave near Mecca, the commentator made no qualification when saying the Prophet's "mission was given by Divine revelation."

While it is accurate to report that in 622, Muhammad and some of his followers moved to Medina on account of the hostility of the leaders of Mecca, it is not accurate to state, "Hostility always began from the Meccan side." Muslim historians extol the ability of the Prophet to organize attacks against the Meccan caravans that were on their way to Syria. Details in the life of the Prophet that may offend Western viewers were totally left out. Indeed, it was a truly sanitized biography!

As to the early years of Islam, the age of the caliphate and the conquests, the impression was given that the spread of this theistic religion was primarily due to the power of the faith. But this is not the whole story. Certainly, the early Muslims were fired with a tremendous zeal as they burst out of Arabia and entered the territories of the Byzantine and Persian Empires. But the rapid success of their conquests was not exclusively due to the "power of the faith." The two superpowers of the time, Persia and the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) had been in violent conflict for several decades. They had exhausted their resources and bankrupted their treasuries in that rivalry. So, they were no longer able to subsidize the Arabized kingdoms on the borders of the Arabian Peninsula that had kept the Bedouin tribes in their homeland. Thus, when the flood of the Arab horseman came from the south, Persia crumbled like a house of cards, while Byzantium lost its hold on Egypt and Syria.

Muslims revere the early "golden" era of their history. That lasted a little over twenty-five years. It was the age of the "Rightly Guided Caliphs." The conquest of the Middle East had begun, and soon North Africa was to come within the Empire. At the same time, the golden age was not so bright and beautiful! Of the four caliphs that succeeded Muhammad after 632, three were assassinated. Ali, the fourth caliph, who

was a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was murdered by some of his disgruntled followers. After his death, the caliphate became dynastic. The capital of the growing empire was moved from Medina to Damascus, Syria. The caliphs of this era, now belonging to the Sunni division of Islam, bore a fierce hostility to the family of Ali. One of their caliphs ordered the massacre of Husein, Ali's son and his entire family. Eventually, in 750, this Damascus-based caliphate came to an abrupt end in a horrible blood bath.

Why not at least one paragraph about this tragic part of the history of the Empire of Faith?

The brutality of the Crusaders was described in great detail. No Christian scholar would defend nowadays that tragic part of the history of Western Christianity. But then, one may say that, to the Western Christians at the time, the Crusades were a type of *Reconquista*. Eventually they failed. Centuries later, the Spanish did mount their own *Reconquista*, and in 1492, they did succeed in regaining their homeland. In the eyes of Muslims, their own conquests were divinely mandated; therefore no criticism may be leveled against them. But non-Muslims may not and should not claim any right to reconquer what once was their own homeland!

I don't have space to go over the other details that were thrust at the viewers by those scholarly men and women who kept on extolling the greatness of Islam. But the apex of my horror was reached when the Ottoman period of Islamic history was being recounted. The Ottoman Turks had come from Central Asia, and served the caliphs as mercenaries. Eventually, they adopted Islam. They became the defenders and spreaders of their new faith. They pushed the borders of the Islamic Empire into Eastern and Central Europe. They devised a military system known as the *Devshirme*. This involved the forceful taking of young Christian boys from their families in the conquered parts of Europe, and forcing them to Islamize. Then, they were formed into an elite army corps that would go on to expand the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. This army was known as the *Jannisary*.

How did one of the commentators describe this barbaric

and inhuman method that deprived Christian families of some of their male offspring? The Ottomans recruited Christian children. Is "recruited" a proper word to use here? What a blatant camouflage of an evil system that lasted for too long!

I still find it hard to believe that a majority of Western men and women treated us for two-and-a-half-hours with this most embellished story of Islam. However, the picture is not that dark. There are several Western historians who have narrated the same story differently, objectively and honestly. We are thankful for men and women like Bat Ye'or, Jacques Ellul, Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Edward Mortimer, and other scholars who have told the truth. Their account of that specific history is essential to know, since we now live in a globalized world. Nations and cultures must learn to live peacefully in a world of shrinking resources and exploding populations. Above all, Muslims need to view their history with objectivity and acknowledge that not all of it was as glorious as the account dished out to Western viewers in the documentary: "Islam: Empire of Faith."

The following books are relevant to this topic and offer us a more balanced view:

*The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*, by Bat Ye'or. (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses), 1996.

My preferred writer is Professor Bernard Lewis. He taught at the University of London, and during the 1990s, he moved to the USA, and taught at Princeton University. His books are available at major bookstores.

*What You Need to Know About Islam & Muslims*, by George W. Braswell Jr. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman), 2000.

*Faith & Power: The Politics of Islam*, by Edward Mortimer. (New York: Random House), 1982.

*In the Path of God: Islam And Political Power*, by Daniel Pipes. (New York: Basic Books, Inc.), 1983.

*Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, by V. S. Naipaul. (New York: Vintage Books, Random House), 1981.

*Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People*, by V. S. Naipaul. (New York: Random House), 1998.

*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, by Samuel P. Huntington. (New York: Simon & Schuster), 1996.

#### Author

Bassam M. Madany was the Arabic language broadcast minister of "The Back to God Hour," the radio ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, 1958-1994.

His broadcasts are still aired daily to the Arabic-speaking world (North Africa and the Middle East) over international radio stations.

A specialist in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, he also teaches at the college and seminary level. He is the author of *The Bible and Islam*, a helpful introduction to the subject. He has contributed to numerous theological publications, including *Reformation and Revival Journal*.

In the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.

VINCENT OF LÉRINS (DIED A.D. 450)  
A COMMONITORY

The earliest Christian training was by means of personal contact and instruction, such as Jesus gave to his disciples and Paul to his companions. Not until the simpler faith crystallized into doctrine and a canon of Scripture called for interpretation did it become necessary to establish theological schools. Before the end of the second century the debates with Gnostics and pagan philosophers made it clear that the leaders of Christianity must be well-trained in theology and interpretation. Catechetical schools became the nurseries of Christian converts and seminaries for the clergy. The oldest and most prominent of these was that of Alexandria.

H. K. ROWE  
THE NEW SCHAFF-HERZOG ENCYCLOPEDIA (VOLUME XI)