“Thank you, but . . . “?

My French brother-in-law recently sent me links to videos of two young French Muslims of North African descent inveighing against crimes committed in the name of religion. They were unmistakably angry and sincere. Interestingly, they said it was up to us—that is to say, we, the Muslims of France—to counteract the evil that was besmirching the name and reputation of millions of our coreligionists.

It was a brave performance, because neither of them disguised himself. They probably know many people who—to put it mildly—disagree with them. One could easily imagine them being targeted by extremists. My brother-in-law (whose son was in the *Stade de France* on the day of the attacks) saw grounds for optimism in these videos.

It is only right and just that we should applaud these two young men whose actions were very courageous (they had families to protect, as well as themselves). It took some brass, as we say in England, to tell their peers that if they didn’t like it in France, they should go back to their villages of origin in Morocco or Algeria, and try life there. One of them even compared the French police, no doubt the objects of visceral hatred among many of the young men whom they were addressing, with those of Morocco, and asked them whether they would really prefer to be at the mercy of the Moroccan police.

The videos raised two questions, however, neither of which I could answer fully.

First, let us suppose that the great majority of the Muslims of France agreed with the two men who posted their video disquisitions. Is that majority more significant than the remaining minority? We are, after all, not talking of a peaceful election in which majority opinion triumphs by

constitutional means (and even proper elections may result in the establishment of the most terrible dictatorships). Nor is the question a static one: for it involves weighing which tendency, integration or violent rejection, is in the ascendant. And in fact the two can grow simultaneously. Where terrorism is concerned, small numbers can have huge effects. (It is the very purpose of terrorism, come to that.)

The second question concerns the importance of elementary historical truth. The two French Muslims who made the videos were believers. They both said that the perpetrators of the crimes were not really Muslim at all because Islam is a religion of peace. There are, of course, Muslims who choose to interpret it peacefully, and we should be grateful for that; but Islam in fact has a very violent history, even according to its own sources, which may be expected to paint such violence in a favorable light, a fact so obvious as to hardly be worth pointing out. This is so whether or not other religions and doctrines have also had violent histories. Islam (in the words of Edward Gibbon, in the context of the spread of another religion) did not spread merely by the convincing evidence of the doctrine.

Not long ago I had a conversation with a charming, cultivated, and intelligent Egyptian who called himself a liberal believer. I quizzed him on two points that I thought were essential stumbling blocks to Islam's accommodation with the modern world: the first was that of equality before the law, and the second was the freedom openly and publicly to apostatize and argue in opposition to the religion. On these questions he was completely sound (at least from my point of view): he accepted equality before the law and apostasy without legal penalty as being perfectly normal, acceptable, and indeed desirable. Moreover, he was honest enough to admit that his views were held by a small, but he hoped growing, minority of Muslims.

On the question of jihad, he was also sound, but for a

historical reason that rather took me aback. Jihad, he said, was no longer justified because there was no legal prohibition anywhere against the preaching of the Muslim message. Jihad had been justified in the past because there had been such prohibition.

It seemed to me an extraordinary reading of history: that the expansion of Islam by force had been only to secure freedom of preaching. Was he claiming that freedom to preach a religious message was a universal right enforceable by violence (in which case, an attack on Saudi Arabia, say, or on Iran, to enforce it would be entirely justified)? Or was he saying that Islam was the only religion that had that right—in which case, we find ourselves in what would have to be called the intellectual antechamber of extremism.

As this was a social occasion, I did not push our discussion further. In any case, it was obvious that my interlocutor was a decent, peace-loving man who would never ordinarily be a terrorist or personally intolerant. So did it really matter if he held an opinion that was mistaken or even absurd? No doubt we all have a tendency to believe six impossible things before breakfast.

If people are peaceful and law-abiding in the belief, say, that Islam is a religion of peace (or indeed in any other belief), should one strive to correct it merely because one holds it to be not merely mistaken, but grossly mistaken? The answer does not seem straightforward.

On the one hand, we do not want so to antagonize such people by dogmatically insisting on what we see as the truth or rubbing their noses in their own errors, lest we drive them into the arms of extremists. On the other hand, not only do we have a basic attachment to historic truth as a value in itself, but there are obvious dangers in accepting historical myth.

So should we just say to the two young men who made the videos, “Thank you,” and leave it at that—or should we say, “Thank you, but . . . ”? ”

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