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August 8, 2010: You Can't Defeat Islam

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: You Can't Defeat Islam

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8/8/2010--The story in today's New York Times about opposition to mosques around the country (story here), especially at the twin towers site in NYC, illustrates more than simple unconstitutional prejudice (though it is that and the Republican Party better be careful to avoid embracing it). Based on a series of books and speakers "opposing" Islam, it is part of a strange misconception by people smart enough to know better that Islam itself is flawed and can somehow be defeated. You can include here Paul Berman (The Flight of the Intellectuals) and Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Nomad: From Islam to America), both reviewed in the August 19 edition of the New York Review of Books by Malise Ruthven (Righteous and Wrong). This is not a matter of refusing or fearing to criticize Islam. It is just a recognition of two facts: first, Islam is a 1500 year old religion practiced by one billion people. It is not going anywhere. Second, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with Islam. This last point is hard for people to grasp, especially people like Ali who have been persecuted by Muslim fanatics and have bravely resisted. But there cannot be something fundamentally wrong with Islam or it would not have the history it does and the attraction that it has. For most of its history Islam has been far more tolerant of non-Muslims than has been Christianity of non-believers under its control. And the Qur'an, for all its passages of militant resistance, is no more violent than the Bible. Ali believes that Christianity has changed but refuses to concede that Islam can and will change as well. Islam will continue to evolve, as have all of our great religions. The problem here is a misunderstanding of history. Fascism and Communism were resisted to extinction during the 20th century. So Berman seems to think that Islam can be as well. But those ideologies were hot-house tomatoes of one or two hundred years duration mostly imposed on people beyond temporary enthusiasms. They did not create satisfying and humane and sustainable ways of being human. All of our religions do exactly that. In deep ways, though flawed, they are true. And therefore you cannot oppose them. You have to engage them.