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April 25, 2013: The Coming Secularization of Islam

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Title: The Coming Secularization of Islam

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4/25/2013 – – Whether the end of the Wars of Religion in Europe, which began with the start of the Reformation in 1517, is reckoned as 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia, or as might have determined the worldview of the framers of the United States Constitution, with the Glorious Revolution in Great Britain in 1688, there was eventually an exhaustion and revulsion in Europe against the bloodshed sparked by religious differences.

This exhaustion at what religion had brought was a key element in the rapid secularization of Europe. In other words, religion, specifically Christianity, which had loomed so large in the Wars of Religion, caused secularization because of its fanaticism. By 1700, something like the secular society of Europe, in the sense of a secular public square, is emerging. With the onset of the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, a thoroughgoing public secularism is established. Religion is still important, crucially important, to millions. But never again is religion in Europe or in North America the source of universal bloodshed. Nor is it ever again the source of universal inspiration. Religion, Christianity, is secularized.

These thoughts are sparked by the carnage in Boston. We still do not know, or at least I do not, what motivated these two brothers to attack innocent runners and onlookers, what dark visions they served. But I am guessing that it had something to do with Chechnya and something to do with Islam. And even if that turns out not to be the case, it will still be understood as having been the case.

The relationship between Boston and the Wars of Religion is this: just as the bloodshed of the Wars of Religion discredited religion and convinced people generally that religion had to be tamed, privatized, and banished in a sense from the public square, just so the time is coming when Islam will be thoroughly discredited in the eyes of the world. Even in the eyes of believers. For Islam has brought an endless reign of violence, just as Christianity in Europe brought an endless reign of violence.

The secularization of Europe, which proceeded so rapidly to undermine the dominance of Christianity in Europe, could never have been predicted from a vantage point of 1648 or 1688. From that vantage point, Christianity seemed monolithically dominant. But once people began to judge Christianity as dangerous, its decline was inevitable.

In the same way, Islam today seems enormous and well-established and dominant. But what the world sees is that the most vociferous devotees to Islam take up not only war, not only violent resistance to political oppression, but mindless and cowardly destruction of public buses and the murder of innocent eight-year-olds and women who are merely watching a race. The justice or injustice of these campaigns, their roots in genuine national self-determination, are all eventually beside the point, just as the justice of the individual Wars of Religion in Europe and the grievances of each side were eventually seen as irrelevant.

And so, what I expect to happen is a rapid revulsion and turning away from Islam. That turning away will not immediately manifest in decline in numbers of adherents to Islam, just as it did not so manifest immediately in Europe. The turning away will manifest in an increasing willingness to endorse a secular public square, a concept totally alien to Islam today.

I do not mean by any of this to suggest of Islam is a violent religion or that these murderous fanatics are fair representatives of the tradition. I don't mean that anymore than I believe that Christianity is a violent religion. It is not. It is a beautiful religion. But Christianity was still responsible for the Wars of Religion. And Islam is still responsible for the terrorism committed in its name. And, for that matter, Judaism is responsible for the settler movement in Israel, which manifests generally in this principle: the more committed one is to Judaism, the more likely it is that one refuses to recognize the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. What could be more likely to discredit religion in the eyes of the young?