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Muslim Masculinity, the Media, and the Medieval Period

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Muslim Masculinity, the Media, and the Medieval Period

Since the year 2000, three words have streamed across headlines over and over. They are always all capital and all bolded letters. Whenever the newscaster says them, regardless of network, their cadence and intonation are always the same.

RADICAL. ISLAMIC. TERRORISM. On both sides of the political aisle, the United States representatives and senators alike are repeating these words. Some politicians are louder than others, such as Rudy Giuliani who had been the mayor of New York City during the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. After his run for the presidential nomination with the GOP in 2008, he made his way back into the media spotlight during Donald Trump's presidency in 2016 as a member of his legal team. During Trump's term, he vehemently supported the president's ban on migrants from several Muslim majority nations. In a speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Cleveland, Ohio Giuliani shouted into the microphone that the ban was for the safety of all Americans (Giuliani, Rudolph, 2016, RNC speech). In pursuit of his idea for safety, Giuliani put police officers in mosques around New York when he was the mayor, even before the 9/11 attacks (Paybara, 2016, Politico). In an interview with CNN, Donald Trump expressed the same sentiments. "Hey, look, I'm about security, I'm about safety, I'm about borders" He said (Trump with Tapper, 2015 interview) Trump ran on immigration restrictions in overtly xenophobic terms. One of his campaign promises was to create a national database of Muslims who lived in the United States (Paybara, 2016, Politico). But where did the idea of the dangerous, extremist Muslim terrorist come from? It started hundreds of years ago, medieval writings against Arab Muslims

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intentionally perpetuated demonstrably false views of Muslim men as religious extremists and hedonists for Europeans because of wars, propaganda, and its redistribution through time which have impeded methods of resolving geopolitical conflict in a reductionist, strawman fashion.

Misrepresentation never occurs out of the blue, without any precourse. This particular method hit the ground running in the latter years of the 13th century. A Dominican friar and writer Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, among others, wrote several pieces of prolific and well consumed writing (Szpiech, 2013, 2). The most well-known and best surviving of his work to modern scholars is called *Contra Legem Saracenorum*. This text is incredibly inflammatory, direct, and pejorative in its language. Riccoldo da Monte di Croce took the position that Islam is “a religion of killing and death”¹ (Burman, 2004, 3) and that “It must be understood that the Qu’ran is not the religion of God because it does not bear witness to itself, the Old Testament nor the Gospel”² (Burman, 2004, 2).

His comments on the nature and validity of the Qu’ran cannot be misconstrued. Contemporary mainstream media sources make headlines by appropriating his words. “Is Islam a destructive force in the world?” is a headline from Bill O’Reilly’s program on Fox News called *Talking Points* in 2014. While covering the attack of Kobani, Syria, by ISIS he states that “civilians are fleeing in panic because these ISIS savages are known to slaughter innocent people”. His statement is very similar to di Croce’s statement eight

¹ Lex ista prope potest dici lex occasionis et mortis

² Sciendum est quod Alchoranum non est lex Dei. Non enim attestatur ei nec vetus Testamentum nec Evangelium

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hundred years earlier because of the lack of evidence, buzzword language, and focus on the people, rather than the actions. Just the same as how his vitriol is being heard across the United States, similar comments were spread around the Latin speaking world; which was most, if not all of Europe in the 13th century. They were consumed by the literate and spread by word of mouth. At the time of its inception, the clashes between Muslims and Christians rose to a fever pitch because of their theological differences being used to dehumanize the other side.

A good Muslim man is someone who submits to Allah, holds true to their faith, and only uses violence when it is necessary (Arat and Hasan, 2018, 7-11). The intention of writing *Contra Legem Saracenorum* in the first place was to falsify the Qu'ran and to galvanize a response to the violence perpetrated by Muslims- using their faith as ammunition. The intuitive path to accomplish is to attack inconsistencies between Islam and Christianity, while at the same time, and maintaining that Islam is a religion that indoctrinates its followers into committing heinous violent acts. While intuitive, it was also very difficult. As Thomas Burman, a professor of History at the University of Tennessee, aptly puts "So widespread was this strategy and so abundant the surviving treatises informed by it, that it would seem natural for modern scholars looking back on this period to conclude that Latin-Christian Qu'ran-reading in the high and later Middle Ages concise of little else but an anxious search through its pages for those passages that could be used effectively in either refuting Islam or defending Christianity (Burman, 2004, 2-3). Di Croce was not alone in his aggression. Such as Ramon Marti who attacked Muslims but also used their religion as a weapon against Jews.

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Capistrum Iudaeorum, a Muzzle for the Jews, was an argument against Islam written by Ramon Marti in 1267 CE. In *Capistrum Iudaeorum*, he uses a Muslim man as a way to support the values of Christianity against Judaism. But first, he has to be clear that Christianity is at the top of his hierarchy and that Islam will always be inferior to it (Szpiec, 2013, 6). A large part of his argument was that Muslims and heretics will not be admitted into Paradise because the Prophet Muhammed promised sinful things to the Muslims, such as sexual pleasure (Szpiec, 2013, 9). Marti took a stance from a Christian-based truth. The fact that Islam, as a religion, is permissive of sexual pleasure makes it the antithesis of Christianity, which centers itself around restraint from physical pleasures. In Islam, sexual pleasure is a feeling like any other and is even celebrated. According to Ruth Roded's research: "In Ibn Sa'd's collection of biographies of great Muslim men and women of the early years of Islam, for example, eight traditions address the superior sexual performance of the Prophet (Ibn Sa'd 1960–68: 8: 192–3; cf. 1: 374). According to one of these, one night the Prophet made the rounds of all nine of his wives. Others relate that the Prophet had the virility of forty men. The Prophet's sexual fortitude was a divine gift" (Roded, 2006, 1) If the Prophet is held as an example for masculinity, sexuality should be celebrated.

Other Christian Writers attacked the Prophet Muhammed for his domestic life (Roded, 2006, 3). In large part, they were trying to discredit the fact that Islam is a revealed religion (Roded, 2006, 3). In Judaism, this was to Abraham; in Christianity, it was Jesus; in Islam, Muhammed. Because Christian clergy men practice celibacy, celibacy became cognate with piety. And because piety is moral to clergy men, sexual

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permissiveness becomes blasphemy. So, to find that a very powerful religious figure, who claims to believe in the same God, was very sexually active made great waves and warranted a response (Roded, 2006, 4).

The Qu'ran itself was prolific, even in the 13th century before the printing press. There were many people who could read in both Latin and Arabic. Several Latin translations of the Qu'ran have been found. Robert of Ketton was one such translator and in the margins of his translation, an anonymous reader scribbled several comments (Szpiech, 2013, 6). In Ketton's translation, in the section that describes inconsistencies between Christianity and Islam, the reader wrote "*Stulta et Heretica*" (stupid and heretical) (Szpiech, 2013, 6). The notes in the margins are evidence for, at the very least, the thoughts at the time of the translator or further, the zeitgeist among Christians.

The Spanish Christian-convert writer named Alfonso argues in his "Response to the Blasphemer" in 1340 CE that Muslims are more Christians than anything else because they "agree with the Christians" and "believe in Christ in some way" (Szpiech, 2013, 17). He rationalizes that the differences come from, what he believes to be, the purpose of Islam. He thinks that the object of Islam is to bring compromise between Jews and Christians. So, in this way, the Prophet Muhammed believed in Jesus but not the trinity (Szpiech, 2013, 17). On believing in Christ, Alfonso says that "no one denies it except for the Jews, who are the fewest of all (los menos de todos) in the world" (Szpiech, 2013, 17).

Marti followed the same line of thinking as Di Croce. Although he took a unique route. He stated that because Muslims recognize Christ, they were nothing more than

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Christian heretics. The translation offered by Szpiec is this: “every Saracen

acknowledges belief in the Lord Jesus, even though he denies it in his actions...In fact,

they [the Muslims] do not seem like anything except Christian heretics” (Szpiec, 2013,

9). The author sums up the ramifications nicely with: “Martí begins in his *Capistrum* to

invoke Muslim texts to support Christian ideas without ever affirming Islamic faith to be

true.”(Szpiec, 2013, 9). So, good Muslim men who were submissive to Allah and also

enjoyed sexual pleasure were now vile sinners because of adherence to their faith.

Sexual licentiousness³ soon became a very common talking point for Christian polemic⁴ writers.

In the 13th century, permissiveness was the serious fault according to Christians. But now, in the 21st century, many believe that the greatest fault of the Muslim majority region is that their laws are rigid and restrictive. “*Sharia*” is another buzzword used by the media to arouse their consumers. Just as when Bill O’Reilly on his show aired a poll stating different percentages of people who support *sharia* law from various Middle Eastern nations “the rules of which are controversial at the least” (O’Reilly, Bill, 2014, Fox News). The portrayal by American media accentuates the differences of life in a country with *sharia* to make a point. *Hijab*, for example, is commonly used as a marker for the restrictiveness of Islam to Americans. For example, a CBS correspondent named Lara Logan gave an interview with Fox in August 2021 when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. She said that “It’s a long slow death if you’re unlucky. If you’re lucky, you’ll

³ From the Latin *Licet*, (Permitted),

⁴ From the Greek word *πόλεμος* (war), Polemics are intentional attacks against another person’s position or ideas to discredit them

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just be slaughtered quickly, because that is what life is like for women under the Taliban, a long slow death" (Bennatan, Lisa, 2021, Fox News).

Sharia law is a construction of the law around the tenants of Islam. In Modern Standard Arabic, *sharia* means a road, so we could translate *sharia* in this context as a path, or the path. During the violence of colonialism of North Africa, the pressure to conform to European prudence and norms was great. Whether or not Muslims had been licentious is a moot point, because they were not after the colonizers were done. This informed Naguib Mahfouz, a well-known Egyptian writer in the 20th century to write in the defense of the Prophet Muhammed that sexuality is a natural human feeling. Because the Prophet was a man, he had those feelings and that is okay (Roded, 2006, 9).

After di Croce, the 18th philosopher Voltaire wrote a play called *Mahomet* about the Prophet Muhammed and his virility. Briefly, the plot of *Mahomet* is, according to Lahoucine Ouzgane: "Criticism of fanaticism does permeate the text, but the major crime is committed by Seid, slave of Mahomet. Mahomet commands Seid, in the name of God to murder Zopir, his father; then Mahomet has Seid poisoned. From the outset, Mahomet desires his slave girl, Palmira, the only woman in the play. In the last scenes she attacks Mahomet as an impostor, bloody savage, seducer and tyrant." (Morgan, Adrian, 2010, Campus Watch). *Mahomet* picks up on the polemic 400 years earlier and picks up on the deepest cut against Islam. The trait that has bled through the years and had been remembered the clearest was a want for sexual pleasure- while also vilifying the Prophet. In the years after this play was first performed, mid-19th century scholars

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in many disciplines wanted to analyze the life of Muhammed as scientifically as possible. While they were doing this, Orientalist artists and literature writers were describing the Middle East as a very sexual place (Roded, 2006, 6). "Licentious" is a term that keeps being reused in this description.

As the degrees of separation become larger, the truth is stretched just as much. In the same way how when a man quoted a *Hadith*⁵ to Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim scholar, she felt compelled to research the context of the quotation. The quotation is "Those who entrust their affairs to women will never know prosperity" (Mernissi, 1998, 2). The quotation was determined to be *Sahih*⁶ according to al-Bukhari. It was included in the collection of other *Sahih* quotations put together by him in the 9th century. Al-Bukhari had recorded who supposedly had said it, it was Abu Bakr, companion of the Prophet Muhammed (Mernissi, 1998, 3). She then asked the most crucial question, why did he say that and for what purpose? She found in her research that Abu Bakr repeated the *Hadith* to politically finish A'isha after the Battle of the Camel and to justify his and Ali's actions to usurp control of the Caliphate (Marnissi, 1998, 5). The playbook for 13th century polemicists, the 21st century mainstream media, and the misuse of *Hadith* is all the same. Certain parts of history stick more than others. It can have devastating ramifications if consumers do not do their own research to understand the context for a quotation or a situation on the news.

⁵ A quotation from the Prophet Muhammed or his companions

⁶ *Sahih* means true - Hadith are authenticated on a scale, with *sahih* being the most accurate; That this quotation was very likely to have actually been spoken.

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In the 13th and 14th centuries, while many Christian polemic writers were trying to discredit Islam as a religion of fools and of heretics, there was one who wrote in their support; The answer would surprise anyone. After the Fall of Acre to the Mamluks and Baghdad to the Mongols, none other than Riccoldo da Monte di Croce wrote Five Letters on The Fall of Acre. His Five Letters spoke of the great success of Islam which had a lot to do with the military success of their armies in putting own the last Crusader state at Acre (Burman, 2004, 29). So even though he had written ghastly things in the past he caved a little bit, but the damage had already been done. Regardless of his views at the end of his life, his vitriol outlasted his respect.

Polemic and headlines inform the way that consumers think. It is conscious and unconscious. When the contemporary mainstream media discusses radical Muslim terrorists, the imagery that automatically comes to mind of a consumer is of an Arab masculine man. The images shown while they speak distorted words are also of Arab men. Ergo, Arab men are visually linked with the auditory phrase, *radical Islamic terrorist*. The fear that a consumer feels then becomes linked with visual and auditory stimuli. The result is whenever someone says “terrorist” the listener thinks of an Arab man and feels scared. The misrepresentations of masculine Muslim men in the 13th century inform the representation of contemporary masculine Muslim men in the 21st through a long line of media communication. Polemic rhetoric is a collection of building blocks that builds on itself. Polemic is a snowball intended to grow out of control.

Polemic attacks more aspects of masculine gender identities than Muslims themselves. Two Islamic theologians, Zehra Arat and Abdullah Hasan, have analyzed

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the Qu'ran for laudable masculine traits. They discerned five aspects of masculinity that every Muslim man should strive to embody in order to be a good Muslim man.

According to the Qu'ran and the interpretations of Arat and Hasan, these traits are:

Submissiveness, Altruism, Righteousness, Steadfastness, and Combativeness.

Mainstream media outlets intentionally paint an abstract and myopic visage of both Islam and those traits for their consumers to generate views and clicks. Buzzwords like *Jihad*, *Sharia*, and *Radical Islamic Terrorism* screen on top of headlines and the bottom of television sets all the while they are twisting the truth.

In essence, the proscribed traits are all things that enlighten their feeling of piety and of being masculine. A literate person living in Latin Christendom (Europe), would hear the other, perverse side of these traits from the writers of the 13th century. Similar to Aristotle's philosophy on the application of government⁷, I have applied his philosophy to Arat and Hassan's research and have yielded the following alternatives: Radicalism, Discrimination, Indoctrination, Stubbornness, and Annihilation. Radical in that Muslims will do anything to achieve their ends for their faith. Discriminatory to target Christians. Indoctrinated to never be persuaded. Stubborn in refutation of the West. Muslims will not stop until the Christians are wiped out, annihilated. It started with a Muslim man striving to be good and fit into his community and his truth. Christian men did the same every day across the Dardanelles. From another perspective and another agenda, the imaginary radical antagonist can easily be believed.

⁷ Each government system has a pure and a corrupted version- i.e., Oligarchy and Aristocracy or Democracy and Ochlocracy. The pure form works for the enrichment of everyone, but the perverse works for the enrichment of the few.

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Polemic is used as a vehicle to misinform their consumers, continuously from their time to now. The same arguments have been recycled and reused by scholars and by media outlets since. The seeds planted in the 13th century continue to sprout today; like weeds, they are difficult to stop. The perverse traits are highlighted by the mainstream media in their coverage of the Middle East and of the bad actors who give Islam a bad name to the rest of the world. Masculine Muslim men such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have populated the minds of Americans for the last 20 years. Their identities as Muslims have trumped their violence. The reasons for their actions are not based on Islam. It is based on their thirst for power. The shaping and reshaping of hegemonic masculinities over years of conflict have molded the perception of these men. The discussion around their terror must be placed on the facts of their violence. The reduction of the conversation beguiles the minds of the American people to the false belief that Islam is to blame, not the men themselves. It stunts the ability to think critically about global politics and how to resolve conflict. In order to draw clicks and views, the only important characteristic of those masculine men is not only that they are Muslim- but that they are radical, anti-American, brainwashing, relentless, and destructive.

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