

January 18, 2009

Saints Athanasius and Cyril, of Alexandria

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among books that I have read recently, one of the most interesting and informative is *American Christians and Islam*, by Thomas S. Kidd, a history professor at Baylor. Nowadays any book with the word "Islam" in the title has an extra marketing edge, but this is scarcely a book about Muslims. Indeed, the author has almost nothing to say about Islam.

The substance of the work is better conveyed in its bulky subtitle: *Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism*. The book is, in short, a detailed historical survey of a certain aspect of Evangelical Protestant thought, the kind of book we would expect of Dr. Kidd, whose earlier work includes *The Great Awakening* and *The Protestant Interest*.

The eight chapters of this book correspond roughly to periods of American history. Because the limits of these intervals are partially determined by events in the Muslim world, however, they do not correspond very exactly to the usual periods recognized by academic historians.

Until the nineteenth century, Islam remained largely an abstraction, a symbol used rhetorically in arguments that had little to do with that religion itself. During the Colonial Period, for instance, when familiarity with Islam came chiefly from reports about Muslim pirates operating from North Africa, it was a simple task for preachers to pair the sultan with the pope by way of explaining the identity of Gog and Magog in the Book of Revelation. Again, with the advent of the American Revolution, when the British navy no longer protected American shipping, Islam became a popular symbol of oppressive political systems.

The 19th century saw two new developments in American attitudes toward Islam. First, the Second Great Awakening created a massive evangelical impulse, sending scores of missionaries overseas for the conversion of Muslims. Apart from the conversion of some Eastern Orthodox Christians to Evangelical Protestantism, however, the actual results of such missions were rather slight.

Second, there was the rise of Dispensationalist eschatology, spawning an expectation of the imminent fall of the Ottoman Empire. This fall would permit the return of the Jews to Palestine, to replace the allegedly backward Palestinians, who were deemed unworthy of inhabiting the Holy Land.

Needless to say, these two developments were very much opposed: Although a pronounced eschatology can in theory inspire a strong missionary spirit, Dispensationalism tended to demonize the very people intended for evangelization! On the whole, therefore, mission work among the Muslims often suffered, in spite of the many devout and talented

lives devoted to that work.

Although there have always been Protestants sincerely appreciative of Islamic learning and culture, their voices were most frequently smothered by a growing fanaticism against Muslims on the part of popular Dispensationalism. Indeed, an increasingly morbid fascination with the Book of Revelation has remained a staple in Protestantism's interest in Islam during all periods of American history.

That fascination came to a new level of fervor in the twentieth century, with the fall of the Ottomans, the Balfour Declaration, and the founding of the State of Israel—all of these events interpreted as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Resisting voices of moderation on these subjects, scores of writers and preachers have done everything possible to treat American foreign policy as the Lord's chosen instrument of that fulfillment.

Even while decrying the violence of a militant Islam, exponents of Dispensationalist eschatology frequently rival them in fanaticism. Forgetting the Christian duty to make peace, they continue to hurt America's relationship to Muslim countries by "portraying Islam as essentially evil and forecasting the inexorable clash of Muslims with American Christian military power." This crisis has grown especially acute since September 11, 2001.

Kidd's is a sympathetic and well-informed voice of sanity and Christian equanimity in the midst of this turmoil. His closing appeals to reason, civility, and charitable discourse could provide a better setting, I believe, for a fruitful mission to Islam. Otherwise, one fears what level of catastrophe may be required to discredit Dispensationalist craziness.

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