

Inspiring Intolerance: The Truth About Robert Spencer—A Review of *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*

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PART I. INTRODUCTION

September 11 marked the beginning of a significant erosion of civil liberties in the United States. Actions taken by the government, including the special registration of men from Muslim countries resulting in the detainment of hundreds, exemplify this deterioration of civil rights.¹ Coupled with the formal decay of rights has been an increase in discrimination, violence, and hate crimes against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim. In August 2006, the Gallup Poll News Service wrote that “Anti-Muslim sentiments [are] fairly commonplace” noting that four in ten Americans admit feeling prejudice against Muslims.² The Sikh Coalition³ and Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund⁴ have documented the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans post-9/11. Negative attitudes that Americans harbor towards Muslims make formal discrimination permissible. Gallup data suggests that 39% of Americans want Muslims to carry a special identification card and 41% of Americans

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1. American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, *Special Registration, Detentions Cast Shadow of Fear Over Immigrant Communities*, ACLU OPEN FORUM, Winter 2003, http://www.aclu-sc.org/attach/o/OpenForum77_1.pdf.

2. Lydia Saad, *Anti-Muslim Sentiments Fairly Commonplace: Four in Ten Americans Admit Feeling Prejudice Against Muslims*, THE GALLUP ORG., Aug. 10, 2006, at <http://institution.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=24073>.

3. The Sikh Coalition, *History of the Sikh Coalition*, <http://www.sikhcoalition.org/History.asp> (last visited Feb. 13, 2007).

4. Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), *Anti-Asian Violence*, <http://www.aaldef.org/violence.php> (last visited Feb. 13, 2007).

want Muslims to undergo special checks at the airport.⁵

Amongst the American voices inspiring religious and ethnic discrimination today is *New York Times* bestselling author Robert Spencer in his recent book, *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*. According to Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is the last Prophet and the founder of Islam.⁶ In *The Truth About Muhammad*, Spencer asserts that “bloodthirsty jihadists”⁷ invoke the image of the Prophet Muhammad and that it is therefore necessary to understand who the Prophet Muhammad is in order to understand the “jihad violence.”⁸

This review critiques *The Truth About Muhammad* and highlights both structural and substantive flaws contained within. Part II will discuss the background and publishing of the book and how its development evinces its biases. Part III will offer substantive critiques of Spencer's unfounded assertions about Islam, his interpretation of Islam's treatment of women, and of his view of all Muslims as violent. Ultimately, Robert Spencer's book does little more than contribute to an already abundant discourse of hate speech against Muslim Americans.

PART II. THE TRUTH ABOUT ROBERT SPENCER

Before making an attempt to understand Spencer's arguments, it is necessary to place the book in its larger political context. *The Truth About Muhammad* is published by Regnery Publishing, a subsidiary of Eagle Publishing, whose website proclaims itself “the leading conservative publisher in America.”⁹ Regnery has also published a series of “politically incorrect guides,” including *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the South (and Why it Will Rise Again)* and Robert Spencer's first *New York Times* bestseller, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*.

When one picks up Spencer's book, the first thing she will see on the cover is a quote cited as “praise” for the author and attributed to a website *revivingislam.com*: “May Allah rip out his spine from his back and split his brains in two, and then put them both back, and then do it over and over again.” The quote is meant to highlight the violent reaction on the part of Muslims to Spencer's book. The Web site *revivingislam.com*, however, does not exist. Further, Michelle Malkin and Daniel Pipes, two of the

5. Jeffrey M. Jones, *Americans Felt Uneasy Toward Arabs Even Before September 11: Majority Supports Increased Security Measures Even for Arabs Who Are United States Citizens*, THE GALLUP ORG., Sept. 28, 2001, at <http://institution.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=4939>.

6. Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace, Family Laws, <http://www.learningpartnership.org/resources/legislation/familylaw> (last visited Feb. 13, 2007).

7. ROBERT SPENCER, *THE TRUTH ABOUT MUHAMMAD: FOUNDER OF THE WORLD'S MOST INTOLERANT RELIGION* 9 (2006).

8. *Id.* at 11.

9. Regnery Publishing, <http://www.regnery.com/eagle.html> (last visited Apr. 6, 2007).

individuals giving praise on the book jacket cover, are vociferous supporters of Japanese internment and racial profiling.¹⁰

While this initial knowledge might thwart one's ability to see Spencer's book as taking an objective stance, the contents of the book further substantiate Spencer's biased perspective. Spencer makes deliberate choices as an author that reveal his bias. For example, the word "Allah" for Arabic-speaking peoples, regardless of religion, translates into "God."¹¹ Spencer chooses to ignore this widely accepted translation and practice. Instead Spencer asserts that he will use "Allah" rather than the word "God" to differentiate the Muslim practice from a Judeo-Christian belief. Spencer bases this distinction on the false rationale that Islam classifies Christianity and Judaism as a "renegade perversion of Islam."¹² Spencer's desire to rewrite context and meaning is made clear through his choice of language in various parts of the book. For example, rather than using "Muslim" when referring to Muslims, Spencer often purposefully chooses highly politicized terms in the American context including "mujehedin" and "jihadist."¹³ These are words that have taken on negative connotations in the United States, and are not interchangeable nor a substitute for "Muslim." Finally, Spencer discounts the thriving discourse around Islam, interpretation, laws, and rights by labeling all Muslims who have developed a more nuanced understanding of Islam as "Muslim apologists." Despite the active role these voices play in Muslim countries and communities, Spencer erases them to support his own portrayal of Islam as oppressive and violent.¹⁴

PART III. THE TRUTH ABOUT ROBERT SPENCER'S INTOLERANCE

Aside from structural problems with the book and issues with the charged political background of its publishing, there are deep substantive flaws with Spencer's arguments. Spencer consistently makes unfounded assertions about Muslims, misinterprets Islam's treatment of women, and misrepresents all Muslims as "Islamicists," ready to strike terror at any moment.

A. Unfounded Assertions

Spencer often puts forth grand assertions about Muslims and Islam without providing any substantive or reliable evidence. He boldly begins the book by declaring that a quest for a moderate Prophet Muhammad will

10. Daniel Pipes' Weblog, The Japanese Internment, CAIR, and ME, <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/391> (Dec. 28, 2004).

11. SPENCER, *supra* note 7, at 17.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 8.

14. *Id.*

not be accepted by Muslims.¹⁵ Further, because he feels that any investigation into the historical Prophet Muhammad will not gain a significant audience in the Islamic world, he asserts that “the figure of Muhammad as he appears in the Qur’an [is] certain to be influential.”¹⁶ Spencer does not offer evidence for his argument that Muslims will be resistant to a full understanding of the Prophet’s life. Spencer, an outsider to the practice of Islam, chastises the global Muslim community for not diligently assessing their Prophet—a task he claims to tackle. In doing so, he understands himself to be on higher moral ground than any Muslim, and in turn glorifies his role of searching into the story of the Prophet Muhammad. Spencer states that Muslim ideology has developed such that “good became identified with anything that redounded to the benefit of Muslims, and evil with anything that harmed them” and further that “[m]oral absolutes were swept aside in favor of the overarching principle of expediency.”¹⁷ Spencer makes grand generalizations about the history of Islam and Muslim people, reflecting his own judgment of their values.

Spencer emphasizes what he considers to be the violent nature of Muslims throughout the book, often by making unjustified leaps in logic. For example, without any evidence supporting his claim, Spencer announces that “jihad warriors treat any counter-measures by American or Israeli forces as unprovoked attacks, deserving swift and fierce revenge.”¹⁸ This statement presupposes that all Americans and Israelis have inflicted violence only as a response to “jihadist” terror attacks, placing the blame on all Muslims while labeling them jihadists. Even noted conservative author Dinesh D’Souza has criticized Spencer’s reductive interpretation of Islam as “emphasiz[ing] the violent passages in the Koran, while downplaying the passages that urge peace and goodwill”; D’Souza argues that Spencer’s interpretation is “letting Bin Laden define Islam.”¹⁹

Spencer goes on to say that Muslims are incapable of “turning the cheek” and that vengeful behavior has been the standard “[e]ver since Muslims began fighting in imitation of their warrior prophet.”²⁰ Would Spencer call on Christians or Americans to ever turn their cheeks when faced with violent attacks? Not only does Spencer hold Muslims to a higher standard, he also labels Muslims as “vengeful” without offering support for his false assertion that Muslims fight in imitation of the Prophet Muhammad. Yet again Spencer completely abandons any thought of investigating alternate rationales to violence in order to better explain

15. *Id.* at 9.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at 99.

18. *Id.* at 119.

19. Posting of Dinesh D’Souza to News Bloggers, *Letting Bin Laden Define Islam*, <http://newsbloggers.aol.com/2007/03/02/letting-bin-laden-define-islam/#cont> (Mar. 2, 2007, 1:35 PST).

20. *Id.*

geopolitical struggles.

B. Robert Spencer—Feminist?

Spencer's unfounded statements about Islam reveal a major substantive flaw in his work: his failure to acknowledge the alternative and diverse discourses on Islam and the interpretation active today in Muslim communities. This intentional oversight is most blatant in his disregard for the work of academics and activists reorienting the role of women in Islam. Perhaps most ironic—given Spencer's American right-wing ideological stance, one which historically opposes women's rights—is Spencer's nomination of himself as a voice for Muslim women's rights. Much like the Victorian, colonial assertion of paternalism advocating the “rescuing” of colonized women from their men,²¹ Spencer makes desperate pleas to end the inequalities “suffered” by Muslim women throughout his book.²²

For example, Spencer cites the oft-mentioned standard in some interpretations of Islamic law that require four witnesses to prove a rape. Spencer ends his discussion of the topic on this point, suggesting that “modern Muslims and spokesmen for Islam do seem embarrassed by this material—or at least they don't want their readers to know much about it.”²³ Quite to the contrary, Muslim activists, scholars, and reformers of Sharia law have vociferously educated the public about the highly problematic presence of laws that further oppress women.²⁴ Communities of Muslim women have worked tirelessly to change the problematic application of these laws to women.²⁵ Alongside openly advocating for change, women's rights activists have argued that the verse has been misconstrued by lawmakers because the law was actually created to protect women from slander.²⁶

Towards the end of his book, Spencer goes through a litany of reasons why one should dislike the Prophet Muhammad. He states that the Prophet is a “misogynist” and bases this on various interpretations that allow Muslim men to have four wives and state that a son's inheritance should be twice the size of a daughter's.²⁷ Spencer presents this information devoid of context or analysis. For example, he fails to acknowledge historical context which would remind us that an allowance for four wives was actually a limitation on the number of marriages allowed at the time. Moreover, he

21. LEILA AHMED, *WOMEN AND GENDER IN ISLAM* 152 (1992).

22. SPENCER, *supra* note 7, at 174.

23. *Id.* at 66-67.

24. AHMED, *supra* note 21, at 234.

25. Jane Little, *Debate Rages over Women in Sharia*, BBC NEWS, June 11, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/2977446.stm>; Zarar Khan, *Thousands Rally Over Pakistan Rape Law*, ABC NEWS, Dec. 11, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=2715462&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>.

26. *See* Little, *supra* note 25.

27. SPENCER, *supra* note 7, at 173.

fails to acknowledge that Islam was one of the few religions that granted provisions for women to inherit. Muslim women's rights activists have long acknowledged the socio-political context of Islam to ground arguments for an evolved and contemporary respect for women's rights within Islam.²⁸

C. *The War on Muslims*

Another pervasive theme of *The Truth About Muhammad* is the suggestion that all Muslims are "violent jihadists." Spencer opens the book by attaching the label of "Islamicist" to all Muslims. He points to the Qu'ran and Islamic tradition as the "supreme example of behavior for Muslims to follow."²⁹ He cites several instances where the Qu'ran instructs Muslims to obey the Prophet Muhammad and insists that "[a]ny devout Muslim will take this [instruction] seriously."³⁰ Spencer introduces his book in this manner before delving into his impressions of the Prophet Muhammad as an extremely violent, ruthless, and even soulless man. The juxtaposition of every Muslim as the Prophet Muhammad's follower and the Prophet as a violent man sets up his notion of all Muslims as violent, vengeful people.

As he develops the introduction to his account, Spencer decides to stop being elusive and simply asserts that Muslims are in fact violent people. He declares: "Islam is not a race; the problems with it are not the product of fear-mongering and fiction but of ideology and facts—facts that have been stressed repeatedly by Muslims around the world, when they commit violence in the name of Islam and justify that violence by its teachings."³¹

Despite a lack of evidence, Spencer continually attempts to point out ways in which Muslims are violent, by relying on his selective interpretation of the Qu'ran and Islamic history. He notes that "Muslims must fight until 'the religion is God's'—that is, until Allah alone is worshipped."³² He later states that Muslims believe "Allah will send angels to fight with the believing Muslims, and they will conquer even against overwhelming odds."³³ These generalizations are characteristic of Spencer's assertion that Muslims are extremists who will not tolerate a plural society.

He concludes with a call for all Americans to recognize Muslims for who they are—"jihadists" ready to attack at any moment. He urges all non-Muslim governments to "stop insisting that Islam is a religion of peace,"

28. AHMED, *supra* note 21, at 120.

29. SPENCER, *supra* note 7, at 8.

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.* at 13.

32. *Id.* at 78.

33. *Id.* at 108.

stating that “falsehoods are never productive.”³⁴ Instead, he views the emphasis by world leaders on the threat that Muslim countries will impose their Islamic law as more productive in fighting terror and keeping their citizens prepared for attack.³⁵ Spencer’s assertions that all Muslims are ready to attack are especially problematic for Muslim Americans living within the United States. It only furthers fear mongering, leaving American Muslims prey to hate speech and violent crimes motivated by misunderstanding and hate.

In direct contradiction to his assertion that all Muslims are violent, Spencer also makes references to peaceful Muslims. However, according to Spencer, peaceful Muslims are vulnerable to recruitment by “jihadists”: “Muslim hardliners have made deep inroads into peaceful Muslim communities by preaching violent Islam as the ‘pure Islam’ and calling Muslims back to what they present as the full observance of their religion.”³⁶ He warns that “if peaceful Muslims can mount no comeback when jihadists point to Muhammad’s example to justify violence, their ranks will always remain vulnerable to recruitment from jihadists who present themselves as the exponents of ‘pure Islam,’ faithfully following Muhammad’s example.”³⁷ Yet again in his style of making grand unsupported declarations, Spencer interprets an event in the Qu’ran to conclude that Muslims have set a pattern to explain instances in which they have not succeeded; he paternalistically chides that “when things go wrong for the Muslims, Muslim leaders inevitably insist it is because they are not Islamic enough.”³⁸

Finally, Spencer points to mosques and Muslim community organizations in the United States as the source of proliferation of jihadism today. He calls upon these groups to work against jihad ideology because he does not view these organizations as adequately fulfilling this duty.³⁹ He disapprovingly writes:

Instead of endorsements of the U.S. Constitution and American values, Islamic institutions in the United States are filled with jihadist propaganda against Jews and Christians. . . . Five years after September 11 there are still no organized, comprehensive programs in American mosques and schools to teach against the jihad ideology or confront the elements of Muhammad’s life that today fuel jihadist violence and subversion.⁴⁰

Spencer’s idea of placing the burden of eliminating Islamist terrorism on Muslim American community groups is premised upon his assumption

34. *Id.* at 192.

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.* at 9-10.

37. *Id.* at 8.

38. *Id.* at 120.

39. *Id.* at 193.

40. *Id.*

that they are responsible for the violence. This assumption is unfounded and rests solely on his unsubstantiated idea that every Muslim worldwide zealously follows his interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad's violent activities and intentions.

PART IV. CONCLUSION

Muslims, South Asians, and Arab Americans are facing a greater incidence of hate crimes, systematic discrimination, disappearances, detention, and deportation. With its lack of analysis, absence of historical context, and gaps in information, Robert Spencer's *The Truth About Muhammad* accomplishes Spencer's goal of vilifying Muslims and misinforming readers about Islam. Spencer frames his book partly as a testament to the importance of the freedom of speech.⁴¹ However, Robert Spencer exercises his right to free speech free from responsibility, choosing instead to inspire hatred and encourage intolerance.

41. *Id.* at 11-12.