

Garry Wills, Qur'anic Scholar

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Garry Wills's *What the Qur'an Meant and Why It Matters* begins with a statement of his certainties. He knows that students of the Qur'an, like himself, "must deal with militant misuses of it" and "blatantly distorted reports of what it says." Garry Wills knows better. For if the militants understood the Qur'an correctly, then they would comprehend the peaceful nature of Islam, and give up terrorism. And if Islamophobes would cease to offer their "blatantly distorted reports of what it says," non-Muslims could see all the good to be found in the Qur'an. Both Muslims and non-Muslims could then come to agree with that formidable scholar of Islam, Pope Francis, who has written "Authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence." That "proper reading" of the Qur'an is what Wills takes as his main task in this book.

But before he gets to that proper reading, he offers what is the least inaccurate, and most amusing, part of his book,

which has nothing to do with the Qur'an but is, rather, his scathing description of those who led us into the Iraq War, and the chrestomathy he presents of naive, ignorant, and arrogant statements that American officials, from President George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld on down, made about that colossal error. He reminds us of all the predictions that were so confidently made: "It was unlikely that there would be internecine warfare between the different religious and ethnic groups." (George Bush); "We will, in fact, be greeted as liberators...It will go relatively quickly...weeks rather than months..."; "The streets in Basra and Baghdad are sure to erupt in joy." (Dick Cheney); "Once we start this, Saddam is toast." (Dick Cheney); "Our military can do the job and finish it fast...five days or five months, but it certainly isn't going to last any longer than that." (Donald Rumsfeld); "Liberating Iraq would be a cakewalk." (Kenneth Adelman); "It's a slam dunk." (George Tenet).

The war in Iraq was not over in a few weeks. It lasted eight years, from 2003 to 2011. It was no "slam dunk" or "cakewalk," but involved more than two million American soldiers in Iraq (there were more than a million in Afghanistan.) They were not greeted as liberators by any Iraqi Arabs, though the Shi'a, unlike the Sunni Arabs, were at least – at first – not murderously resentful. Only the Kurds displayed genuine gratitude for the protection from Saddam's air force that the Americans had provided them from 1991 on.

Bush's confident assertion that it was "unlikely there would be internecine warfare" was an amazing remark, for the Sunni suppression of the Shi'a, including putting down rebellions in 1991 and 1999, was the most salient feature of Saddam's despotism. How the Sunni Arabs of Iraq, who constituted a mere 19% of the population, managed to hold onto power and keep the Shi'a Arabs, who were 65% of the population, underfoot, and to crush their two rebellions, was surely something Bush ought to have known about. And one prediction that could have safely

been made was the very opposite of what Bush suggested. Whatever else happened once Saddam Hussein was removed, there was certain to be a complete upending of the old order and the replacement of the ruling Sunnis by the Shi'a Arabs. The Shi'a Arabs would not relinquish the power they had newly acquired, thanks to the Americans, and the Sunni Arabs were never going to acquiesce in their loss of power. As a consequence, this led to more than a decade of that internecine warfare that Bush so cavalierly dismissed; even now, it has not been extinguished.

Wills has great fun holding up for well-deserved ridicule all these people whose baseless certainties help explain how the Iraq fiasco came to be. And Wills is right to criticize the Iraq War. For whatever his despicable behavior inside Iraq (and Saddam Hussein was hardly a unique monster; there were other Arab despots, such as Hafez al-Assad and Muammar Khadaffy, who rivaled him), he had nothing to do with Al-Qaeda, and it was not our responsibility to bring truth, justice, and the American way to Iraq, or to any other wretched Muslim despotism, but only to deal with those who were linked to the 9/11 terrorists or to other Islamic terrorists. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, the war was justified, as that country served as the safe haven for Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

Once Wills turned his attention from Iraq to the Qur'an, I felt the first stirrings of alarm. For he begins by describing his surprise at not finding any mention in the Qur'an of the 72 virgins. He says the virgins are not in the Qur'an but only, he discovered, in some "discredited ahadith." And thus, he continues, those 9/11 terrorists "were quite ignorant of Islamic teachings." This does not follow. The 9/11 terrorists might have been wrong about the 72 virgins (though the textual support for them is not as flimsy as Wills believes), but that hardly makes them "quite ignorant of Islamic teachings." They may have been misinformed about the precise

heavenly rewards awaiting them, and still be good Jihadis, dutifully following the Qur'anic commands to kill the Infidels wherever they are found, and "striking terror" in their hearts.

But there is more here to worry about. Wills claims that the ahadith about the 72 virgins are "discredited." Does he not know that the story can be found in many different ahadith, including the canonical ahadith collections? One of the authorities for this reward of the dark-eyed virgins is Al-Tirmidhi (see #2687), a pupil of Al-Bukhari (who greatly respected him), and the compiler of one of the six canonical ahadith collections. On what grounds does Wills claim this story of the 72 virgins has been "discredited"? Did some apologist for Islam tell him that, and Wills gullibly accepted it?

And there is one more thing. Wills says there is nothing in the Qur'an about the 72 virgins. That's not quite true. Though the exact number of virgins is not to be found in the Qur'an, a detailed description of their sensual delights can be found therein. Avi Perry notes:

The 72 Virgins notion has its origins in the Qur'an. Although the holy book does not specify the number as 72, it does say that those who fight in the way of Allah and are killed will be given a great reward. It goes on to stipulate that Muslims will be rewarded with women in the Islamic heaven. It even describes their physical attributes—large eyes (Q 56:22) and big, firm, round "swelling breasts" that are not inclined to sagging (Q 78:33). The Qur'an refers to these virgins as houri, companions of equal age, but the highly-flavored emphasis of their bodily characteristics, including their virginity, gave rise to many hadiths and other Islamic writings.

Not only are the many ahadith where 72 virgins are mentioned

not “discredited,” but a fatwa by one of the Islamic world’s leading scholars of the subject concludes that these ahadith about the 72 virgins are “good” and may be relied on. Wills makes no mention of any of these supporting ahadith, about which more information can be found [here](#).

Why does he give so much attention to this business of the 72 virgins? Wills wants readers to believe that the terrorists were ignorant of Islam (but Al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS, was not the only terrorist leader with years of Islamic study behind him, and degrees to prove it), and if he can show they are wrong about the virgins, then by his weird illogic, they must get everything else wrong about Islam as well.

Something else about the Qur’an came as a surprise to Wills:

“What did the scripture of Islam tell me about the duty to kill infidels? Some people are sure it is there, though it isn’t.”

This is an extraordinary statement.

There are 109 verses calling for violent jihad, commanding Muslims to fight – and ordinarily you can’t fight without killing – the Infidel enemy.

Perhaps what Garry Wills meant is that the duty incumbent on all Muslims is not so much to kill Infidels (though killing is called for, he might argue that it is not, strictly speaking, the main point), as to subjugate them and then give them a choice: to be killed, to convert to Islam, or to accept their permanent status as dhimmis, required to pay the jizyah and to be subject to a host of onerous conditions.

That might be what he meant, but if that were the case, then one would expect him to dwell on the “dhimmi” option, that allows the Infidels to live, in order to minimize, if he can, the burden of what was required of them. But instead, Wills never discusses the status of “dhimmi,” and not once do the

words “dhimmi” and “jizyah” appear anywhere in this book on the Qur’an. And it is no accident that he refrains from quoting 9:29, even though it is in this verse that Muslims are commanded not to kill but to “fight,” because it is also the best-known of the Qur’anic verses that sets out the main requirement for dhimmis – payment of the Jizyah “with willing submission.” Wills does want not to draw attention to what the non-Muslims, as dhimmis under Muslim rule, had to endure.

It might be noted that Wills uses something called *The Study Qur’an*, which is a massive attempt, 1,988 pages long, by five Muslim co-authors, who are in the business not of elucidation but of obfuscation, attempting to distract those who use their guide with half-truths or, still worse, interpreting verses to mean the opposite of what they say. More on *The Study Qur’an* can be found [here](#). Wills is especially fond of quoting Joseph Lumbard, a convert and one of the five compilers of *The Study Qur’an*, of whom you can read more [here](#). Lumbard is one of those who tries to convince you that the Qur’anic command to kill the Infidel really isn’t meant to apply to all Infidels. You’ve got to understand that command, claims Lumbard, as only applying to a particular time and place.

Another book Wills favors is Michael Sells’s *Approaching the Qur’an*, which offers a bowdlerized Qur’an, that leaves out all the unpleasant passages commanding Jihad warfare, passes over in silence all the many antisemitic passages in the Qur’an, omits the verses dripping with contempt for all Infidels (“the most vile of creatures”), and does this in the service of its mission, which is to present the “aesthetic quality” of the Qur’an as a text to be chanted, for which Sells thoughtfully supplies recordings of Qur’anic recitations to please his readers.

When this *Approaching the Qur’an* – a work of obvious apologetics – was assigned to incoming freshmen at the University of North Carolina, many people took the side of those parents who did not want their children to be subject to

a tendentious abridgment of the Qur'an, heavily blue-pencilled, that was presented, falsely, as a truthful version of that book. Wills mocks William F. Buckley Jr. and Franklin Graham for taking the side of the parents: "Their concern was clearly to keep others as ignorant of the book as they had managed to remain."

No, that was not their concern. Their concern was to prevent impressionable students from being forced to read not the Qur'an, but a heavily expurgated version of it – that by Michael Sells – that leaves out the violent passages concerning Jihad and infidels. As Buckley wrote: "This edition is exorcised of any sentiments that might have inspired the 9/11 terrorists." In Wills' telling, these islamophobic know-nothings would also have prevented a full version of the Qur'an from being assigned, though there is no evidence of that. Why didn't the University of North Carolina assign the full Qur'an? By not doing so, and instead distributing an apologetic work (for a bowdlerized Qur'an, making it appear much more peaceful than it is, is a work of apology), it was promoting, proselytizing, shilling for a specific religion – Islam. This was being done at the state-funded University of North Carolina, not at a Muslim seminary, and promoting one religion over others at a public university raises constitutional issues. Wills never addresses that; I suspect it is because, having admitted that Sells' sanitized version stresses the "aesthetic quality" of the Qur'an (and it would be easy to comb Sell's text to show just how much, and exactly what, he left out, in order to present the Qur'an in a benign light), he can't successfully argue that UNC was not promoting one religion over others.

A key chapter in Wills's study is "Peace to Believers." It is here that the massive misrepresentation, and misunderstanding, of Qur'anic verses begins, with 5:51. In this verse Allah unambiguously tells the Believers "do not take Jews and Christians as allies" [or "friends"]; it further says that if

you take them as allies, then you “become one of them.” Wills sees 5:51 as saying, instead, that Muslims cannot “run under the shield of another people [Jews or Christians] for protection, as if the Quran were not a strong enough pledge on God’s part to protect his people.”

Is that what 5:51 says? Is it merely a way of affirming faith in the Qur’an, a way of saying “there is no need to take Christians and Jews as friends (i.e., protectors) because the Qur’an offers protection enough? And if you seek them as friends or allies then you are demonstrating insufficient faith in Islam?” That’s what Wills wants you to believe. But isn’t it really a reminder to Muslims not to take Jews and Christians as friends because they are the permanent enemies of Muslims? And if you are friendly with them, and thus become like them, you will then be punished, for “God does not guide such wrongdoers.” Wills does not quote the authoritative Qur’anic commentator Ibn Kathir, who glosses 5:51 thus:

“Allah forbids His believing servants from having Jews and Christians as friends, because they are the enemies of Islam and its people, may Allah curse them.” Could it be made any clearer? Allah continues in this vein in 5:52-60, excoriating the hypocrites and the People of the Book (most of whom are “defiantly disobedient” – 5:59), reminding them that some of “those whom Allah has cursed and with whom He became angry” were transformed into “apes and pigs” (5:60). For Ibn Kathir, 5:51 is simple and clear: Jews and Christians are “the enemies of Islam,” Allah must curse them, and good Muslims should have nothing do with them. It is only very recent apologists for Islam who have distorted the text’s meaning, interpreting it not as a declaration of enmity to non-Muslims, but as an affirmation of trust in the protection afforded by the Qur’an, so that such “friends” are not needed.

As for the Jews, Wills apparently thinks that only a handful of verses could possibly be called antisemitic. If he thinks that, he cannot have studied the Qur’an, as he claims, with

care. As one of the “few” examples (in reality there are more than two dozen) of antisemitism in the Qur’an, he quotes 4:160-62:

For the wrongdoing done by the Jews, We forbade them certain good things that had been permitted to them before: for having frequently debarred others from God’s path; for taking usury when they had been forbidden to do; and for wrongfully devouring other people’s property, For those of them that reject the truth We have prepared an agonizing torment. But those of them who are well grounded in knowledge and have faith do believe in what has been revealed to you [Muhammad], and in what was revealed before you—those who perform the prayers, pay the prescribed alms, and believe in God and the Last Day— to them We shall give a great reward (4:160-162).

Wills apparently did not notice that the “out” that is offered the Jews is nothing less than forced conversion to Islam. For those Jews who remain Jews, an “agonizing torment” has been prepared, and that is all they deserve. But those Jews who have knowledge and faith will believe in what has been revealed to Muhammad, as they do in what was revealed to earlier prophets, and they will fulfill the duties of Muslims – performing the five daily prayers of an observant Muslim, paying the zakat (“prescribed alms”) – required of Muslims, believing in God and the Last Day – and thus become Muslims.

Wills then comments: “This [but this is just one antisemitic verse among so many] has been used to show that the Qur’an is anti-Semitic (though not nearly as anti-semitic as the New Testament Gospel of John or Letter to the Hebrews). And it should be remembered that the Old Testament itself often rebukes God’s people....”

In other words, instead of denying, or even discussing, the antisemitism in this passage, Wills immediately offers a Tu-Quoque defense of Islam: just look, there are many passages in

the Gospels even more antisemitic, and don't forget that in the Old Testament, too, the Jews are rebuked. To that one can only reply: so what? None of that should make us overlook or minimize the antisemitism of this passage – the only antisemitic passage he quotes – nor, more importantly, of the dozens of other antisemitic passages in the Qur'an, which Wills chooses to pass over in complete silence.

Here are the references to twenty-five of those antisemitic passages in the Qur'an, as well as relevant glosses by both classic Qur'anic commentators, such as Ibn Kathir, and by recent Muslim clerics – a steady stream of Islamic antisemitism that Garry Wills somehow managed not to notice but that, fortunately, Robert Spencer has conveniently collected:

The Qur'an depicts the Jews as inveterately evil and bent on destroying the wellbeing of the Muslims. They are the strongest of all people in enmity toward the Muslims (5:82); as fabricating things and falsely ascribing them to Allah (2:79; 3:75, 3:181); claiming that Allah's power is limited (5:64); loving to listen to lies (5:41); disobeying Allah and never observing his commands (5:13); disputing and quarreling (2:247); hiding the truth and misleading people (3:78); staging rebellion against the prophets and rejecting their guidance (2:55); being hypocritical (2:14, 2:44); giving preference to their own interests over the teachings of Muhammad (2:87); wishing evil for people and trying to mislead them (2:109); feeling pain when others are happy or fortunate (3:120); being arrogant about their being Allah's beloved people (5:18); devouring people's wealth by subterfuge (4:161); slandering the true religion and being cursed by Allah (4:46); killing the prophets (2:61); being merciless and heartless (2:74); never keeping their promises or fulfilling their words (2:100); being unrestrained in committing sins (5:79); being cowardly (59:13-14); being miserly (4:53); being transformed into apes and pigs for

breaking the Sabbath (2:63-65; 5:59-60; 7:166); and more.

The classic Qur'anic commentators do not soften the Qur'an's words against Jews, but only add fuel to the fire. Ibn Kathir explained Qur'an 2:61 ("They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of Allah") this way: "This Ayah [verse] indicates that the Children of Israel were plagued with humiliation, and that this will continue, meaning that it will never cease. They will continue to suffer humiliation at the hands of all who interact with them, along with the disgrace that they feel inwardly." Another Middle Ages commentator of influence, Abdallah ibn Umar al-Baidawi, explains the same verse this way: "The Jews are mostly humiliated and wretched either of their own accord, or out of coercion of the fear of having their jizya [punitive tax] doubled."

Ibn Kathir notes Islamic traditions that predict that at the end of the world, "the Jews will support the Dajjal (False Messiah), and the Muslims, along with 'Isa [Jesus], son of Mary, will kill the Jews." The idea in Islam that the end times will be marked by Muslims killing Jews comes from the prophet Muhammad himself, who said, "The Hour will not be established until you fight with the Jews, and the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say. 'O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him.'" This is, not unexpectedly, a favorite motif among contemporary jihadists.

Not just contemporary jihadists, but modern-day mainstream Islamic authorities take these passages seriously. The former Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, who was the most respected cleric in the world among Sunni Muslims, called Jews "the enemies of Allah, descendants of apes and pigs." The late Saudi sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Sudayyis, imam of the principal mosque in the holiest city in Islam, Mecca, said in a sermon that Jews are "the scum of the human race, the rats of the world, the violators of pacts and agreements, the murderers of the prophets, and the offspring of apes and

pigs."

Another Saudi sheikh, Ba'd bin Abdallah al-Ajameh al-Ghamidi, made the connection explicit: "The current behavior of the brothers of apes and pigs, their treachery, violation of agreements, and defiling of holy places ... is connected with the deeds of their forefathers during the early period of Islam—which proves the great similarity between all the Jews living today and the Jews who lived at the dawn of Islam.

From this compilation by Spencer, we can see that antisemitism in Islam, and in the Qur'an, is a huge topic. It deserves a chapter to itself, but instead Wills devotes exactly one short paragraph to a discussion of verses 4:160-62, where Jews are denounced and promised an "agonizing torment"; their only hope of being spared is to convert to Islam. As far as Wills is concerned, that's an adequate treatment of the extent of the antisemitic verses which, in fact, are to be found throughout the Qur'an.

But let's take another look at Wills' understanding of 5:51, which is about Jews and Christians. Wills chooses to believe, as noted above, that when Muslims are instructed in the Qur'an not to be friends (or allies) with Jews and Christians, it's not because there's something wrong with the Infidels, but only because by "seeking protection" from them, that would show a lack of faith on the part of Muslims in the protection Allah already furnishes Muslims.

In fact, 5:51 has nothing to do with a vote of confidence in Allah. It expresses the hostility, even hatred, for Infidels that Muslims should feel. That hostility to Infidels reflects the important Muslim doctrine known in Arabic by the term *Al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, which means "loyalty and disavowal." It signifies loving and hating for the sake of Allah, holding fast to all that is pleasing to Allah, and withdrawing from and opposing all that is displeasing to Allah – namely the

Kuffar.

Wills does not seem to be aware of this doctrine; he fails to realize how uncompromising are the teachings of Islam about the hostility Muslims must feel for all non-Muslims. He leaves out any mention, too, of Islamic supremacism, as in the description of Muslims as “the best of peoples” (3:110) and of non-Muslims as “the most vile of creatures” (98:6). How, after all, can such straightforward verses be twisted and made to express the very opposite of what they do say? When he can’t do that, Wills simply leaves such verses out, no matter how important they may be to our understanding of Islam. You won’t find either 3:110 or 98:6 anywhere in Wills’s study.

Wills likes, when he can, to suggest comforting similarities between Islam and the other two monotheisms. The Qur’an’s teaching, according to Wills, is close to that of “primitive” or pre-Nicaean Christianity; it is critical of the post-Nicaean Trinitarianism, with Jesus as one of the three, that in Islam is understood and rejected as “shirk” – ascribing partners to God. But Islam does not, he suggests, reject all forms of Christianity. It would be fascinating to ask Christians in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and a dozen other Muslim countries, whether they are consoled by Garry Wills’ claim about Islam’s benign view of many forms of Christianity. Islam’s opposition to the Trinity, Wills maintains, “has not prevented Pope Francis from praying to the One God with his beloved Muslims.” But that “one God” of the Muslims is quite different from, is much more aggressive and bellicose than the “One God” of the Christians. For Wills, all Christians ought to see Islam as wise Pope Francis sees it, he who has famously said of Islam – in a remark Wills quotes admiringly – “Authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence.” Is this a case for *Credo quia absurdum*? For those who have read the Qur’an with care, no can do.

Wills then tackles the issue of “hypocrites” and apostates in

Islam, offering a tortured justification of their harsh treatment; historically, the punishment for apostasy in Islam has been death. In its early days Islam "placed a high regard on maintaining fidelity to the group against the threat of persecution. Those who gave in to threats and abandoned the faith were traitors, were turncoats." Wills seems to regard this as an acceptable view. Notice that he describes the early Muslims as requiring "fidelity to the group against threat of persecution." What "threat of persecution" of the early Muslims does he have in mind? Once Muhammad had moved to Medina and quickly established his dominance, where were Muslims being persecuted? The history of Islam from then on, for many centuries, was one of constant, triumphant expansion. And how does he explain the much milder treatment of their own apostates by Christians, who indeed were subject to the "threat of persecution," especially from Muslims? Wills describes the severe punishment for Muslim apostates as if it were a thing of the distant past, though such punishments are still meted out today, if infrequently. Is he aware of just how great is the support among Muslims for killing apostates? In a 2013 Pew Research Center report, 88% of Muslims in Egypt and 62% of Muslims in Pakistan favored the death penalty for those who left Islam.

And again, in his discussion of apostasy, Wills immediately glides into Tu-Quoque, describing "the hard life of apostates" [from Judaism and Christianity] in the Letter to the Hebrews, and even comparing the Christian treatment of apostates unfavorably to that in Islam, because "it [the Qur'an] always leaves room for God's inexhaustible mercy and forgiveness.'" That is apparently Garry Wills' considered judgment on the Qur'an; that it "always leaves room for God's inexhaustible mercy and forgiveness." But does it? If apostates are executed, where is the room for "inexhaustible mercy" and "forgiveness?" And is Christianity, which for many centuries has not punished apostates with execution, really worse than Islam on this score? Garry Wills writes that "Christians" who

betrayed the faith “lost their consecration as bishops or ordination as priests” – not exactly on the same level with the decapitation a “traitor” to Islam (that is, an apostate) faced over many centuries and, in some Muslim countries, still faces today.

Wills claims that the “solidarity of believers in the One God is reflected in the Qur’an’s marriage laws. Muslims may marry Jews or Christians without compromising the religion of any of the parties. Muhammad gave sanction to this by marrying a Jew (Safiyya bint Huyayy)....”

He’s missed the most important point about Islam and these inter-religious marriages. They are all one-way: a Muslim man can marry a Jewish or a Christian woman, but a non-Muslim man is forbidden from marrying a Muslim woman. Men and women are unequal in Islam; the man is the master in the marriage. It would therefore be an outrage for a non-Muslim husband to be able to lord it over a Muslim wife. Far from the Qur’an’s marriage laws reflecting the “solidarity” of the monotheists, the rules show clearly the inequality both between Muslim and non-Muslim, and between men and women. Does Wills know that a non-Muslim man cannot marry a Muslim woman? And why? I suspect that he does not know, as he does not know so many other things about Islam. The alternative – that he does know and is deliberately withholding such information from unwary readers for whom he must feel a certain disdain – is even more disturbing to contemplate.

The chapter on Jihad starts with a single paragraph where Wills discusses how best to convey that Arabic word’s meaning. He suggests “zeal” might be best, possibly because it is a positive word, even if “zealot” is not. Then he immediately drops the word “jihad” and veers into a lengthy discussion of the word “crusade,” which for the Christian West, he wants us to believe, is as central a notion and as omnipresent a word as “jihad” is in Islam. He comes up with exactly four examples: it was used by Eisenhower for his book “Crusade in

Europe"; Billy Graham called his revivals crusades; others have had their "Crusades for Christ"; George Bush used the term when he invaded Iraq ("this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while"). That's it. It is, Wills claims, a "hated term" in the Muslim East, for "it is a sign of the Christian West's age-old aggressions against that whole part of the world."

Perhaps we might stop and examine that last sentence. What "age-old aggressions against that whole part of the world" by Christians is Wills talking about? It was Christians, and Jews and pagans too, of the Middle East and North Africa, who were the victims of Islamic aggression soon after Muhammad's death. Muslim armies swept westward from Arabia, conquering much of the Middle East, Egypt, and North Africa (where St. Augustine and Tertullian, the father of the Latin church, both had lived), all the way across the straits of Gibraltar, up through the Iberian peninsula into France, where the Muslim aggressors were stopped by Charles Martel outside Poitiers. The "age-old aggression" was that by Muslims committed against Christians, and continued with Muslim raids over more than a millennium, along the coasts of Christian Europe, where loot was seized and locals kidnapped, to be brought back to serve as slaves in Dar al-Islam. Those raiding parties went as far north as Ireland and, in one reported instance, Iceland. Muslim raids on Christian shipping in the Mediterranean continued over the centuries, with the seizing of cargo, ships, and Christian seamen who were put to work by their Muslim masters in North Africa.

To the east, Muslim Arabs, having conquered the southern Byzantine provinces of Egypt and Syria, pushed into Asia Minor, subjugating the Christians, and twice laying siege, unsuccessfully, to Constantinople. Other Muslim armies swept through Zoroastrian Persia and then to Hindu India where at first they were repelled, though they kept trying and ultimately were successful, in conquering both Byzantium and

India. The “age-old aggression” in all these lands, east and west of Arabia, were committed by Jihadists eager to make war, in order to enlarge the territory of Dar al-Islam. Their victims were Christians, Jews, pagans, Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists.

Yet here we have Garry Wills insisting on “the Christian West’s age-old aggressions against that whole part of the world.”

But what about the Crusades themselves? Weren’t they, at least, an example of the Christian West’s “age-old aggressions”? No, they were not. The Crusades were a response to centuries of Muslim aggression, to the takeover of Christian lands, and the subjugation of Christians. The First Crusade was prompted by the behavior of the Fatimid Caliph Hakim, who ordered the destruction of many churches in the Holy Land, above all the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,