

I'm With the "Ignorant Masses" – What About You?

by Hugh Fitzgerald

In the pages of *Foreign Policy* (a publication as "elite" as all get-out), [James Traub argues](#), with a stab at comic cliché reversal, that in the Western world "it's time for the elites to rise up against the ignorant masses." For it is those "ignorant masses" that voted for Brexit against the advice of their economic betters, and it is those "masses" who have been blindly, even viciously, "nationalistic." In Traub's lexicon, this signifies that those masses want to limit the migrant invasions, which means not just Polish plumbers taking jobs away from the English in Upper Chippenham or hawthorn-hedged Little Gribbling, as some news accounts would have you believe, but also, and much more worrisome, the influx of Muslims who have been arriving, without so much as a by-your-leave, all over the E.U., causing distress and mounting fear that is bound to grow as Muslim numbers increase.

If the Polish plumbers are resented because they take jobs away from the natives, part of the resentment of Muslims is because so many don't take any jobs at all, preferring to batten on the West's generous benefits. And the "ignorant masses" are the people who actually have to live with these new arrivals, bear the brunt of the Muslim presence in their schools and hospitals, on their subways and buses, at community pools and playgrounds, while the "elites," cushioned by money, and their own smug complacency, not only refuse to recognize the effect of this Muslim invasion, but mock their fellow countrymen for worrying so much about Islam.

James Traub should be putting his faith not in those who today pass for an "elite" (today's "elite" in the Western world is defined less by intellect than by wealth), but, rather, in an

imagined earlier “elite,” consisting of those in America and Europe who wrote most perceptively about Islam. For Islam is what is haunting Europe, filling so many with dread, even if they are made to feel that it is unseemly or wrong to express such feelings, and that explains the success of the so-called “right-wing” or “populist” movements and parties in Europe, as these reflect and express the fears of those whom Traub – and today’s “elites” – so unsympathetically describe as the “ignorant masses.”

The prime American candidate for membership in that imagined “elite” would surely be the redoubtable John Quincy Adams. (And Traub, it should be noted, knows a lot about J. Q. Adams, having just published a biography of Old Man Eloquent.) For Adams was not only the son of a President, but a President himself, the most learned of all of our Presidents before or since, outshining even Jefferson. He was also a deep student of Islam. It is instructive, and salutary, to be reminded of what John Quincy Adams wrote about that faith.

No one in the early American Republic was favorably impressed with Islam. The views of American leaders were derived from their experiences in attempting to suppress the Barbary Pirates, and in negotiating with Muslim emissaries from the North African states under Ottoman suzerainty. President John Adams, for example, had extensive dealings with the North African Muslims, including treaty-making with, and then treaty-breaking by, the Bey of Tripoli, that led him inexorably to a negative view of Muslims and Islam. In the Treaty of Tripoli he stated that “the United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims,” which merely meant that the young Republic had nothing *a priori* against Islam. Apologists for Islam like to quote that statement, failing to note that it was merely pro forma, and in any case Adams came to regret it. But his son John Quincy Adams, though he lacked his father’s immediate experience with Muslims, had studied both the

ideology of Islam and the history of Islamic conquest, and wrote more knowledgeably about Islam than any other American of note.

J. Q. Adams succinctly described the duty of Jihad thus:

The precept of the Koran is, perpetual war against all who deny, that Mahomet is the prophet of God. The vanquished may purchase their lives, by the payment of tribute; the victorious may be appeased by a false and delusive promise of peace; and the faithful follower of the prophet, may submit to the imperious necessities of defeat: but the command to propagate the Moslem creed by the sword is always obligatory, when it can be made effective. The commands of the prophet may be performed alike, by fraud, or by force.

And Adams recognized the misogynistic aspect – the “violence and lust” – of Islam in similar unflinching terms:

In the seventh century of the Christian era, a wandering Arab of the lineage of Hagar [i.e., Muhammad], the Egyptian [....] Adopting from the new Revelation of Jesus, the faith and hope of immortal life, and of future retribution, he humbled it to the dust by adapting all the rewards and sanctions of his religion to the gratification of the sexual passion. He poisoned the sources of human felicity at the fountain, by degrading the condition of the female sex, and the allowance of polygamy; and he declared undistinguishing and exterminating war, as a part of his religion, against all the rest of mankind. THE ESSENCE OF HIS DOCTRINE WAS VIOLENCE AND LUST.- TO EXALT THE BRUTAL OVER THE SPIRITUAL PART OF HUMAN NATURE... Between these two religions [Christianity and Islam], thus contrasted in their characters, a war of twelve hundred years has already raged. The war is yet flagrant ... While the merciless and dissolute dogmas of the false prophet shall furnish motives to human action, there can never be peace upon earth, and good will towards men.

J. Q. Adams stood virtually alone as an American student of Islam. After the Barbary Pirates episode, few Americans paid attention to Islam until late in the 20th century.

But in Europe, given the long conflict between Islam and Christendom, many more wrote about Islam than in the United States. We might include in our imagined "elite" such Europeans as the political philosopher Montesquieu, who noted that "it is a misfortune to human nature, when religion is given by a conqueror. The Mahometan religion, which speaks only by the sword, acts still upon men with that destructive spirit with which it was founded."

And the Scottish moral philosopher David Hume:

The admirers and followers of the Alcoran insist on the excellent moral precepts interspersed through that wild and absurd performance. But it is to be supposed, that the Arabic words, which correspond to the English, equity, justice, temperance, meekness, charity were such as, from the constant use of that tongue, must always be taken in a good sense; and it would have argued the greatest ignorance, not of morals, but of language, to have mentioned them with any epithets, besides those of applause and approbation. But would we know, whether the pretended prophet had really attained a just sentiment of morals? Let us attend to his narration; and we shall soon find, that he bestows praise on such instances of treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge, bigotry, as are utterly incompatible with civilized society. No steady rule of right seems there to be attended to; and every action is blamed or praised, so far only as it is beneficial or hurtful to the true believers.

And Tocqueville, that keen social scientist:

I studied the Quran a great deal. I came away from that study with the conviction there have been few religions in the

world as deadly to men as that of Muhammad. So far as I can see, it is the principal cause of the decadence so visible today in the Muslim world and, though less absurd than the polytheism of old, its social and political tendencies are in my opinion to be feared, and I therefore regard it as a form of decadence rather than a form of progress in relation to paganism itself. (Letter to Arthur de Gobineau, Oct. 22, 1843)

And finally, Winston Churchill, as “elite” a voice as James Traub could conceivably want, whose observations about Islam as a young man remain shudderingly acute:

How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. The effects are apparent in many countries, improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live.

A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grace and refinement, the next of its dignity and sanctity. The fact that in Mohammedan law every woman must belong to some man as his absolute property, either as a child, a wife, or a concubine, must delay the final extinction of slavery until the faith of Islam has ceased to be a great power among men.

Individual Muslims may show splendid qualities, but the influence of the religion paralyses the social development of those who follow it. No stronger retrograde force exists in the world. Far from being moribund, Mohammedanism is a militant and proselytizing faith. It has already spread throughout Central Africa, raising fearless warriors at every step; and were it not that Christianity is sheltered in the strong arms of science, the science against which it had

vainly struggled, the civilization of modern Europe might fall, as fell the civilization of ancient Rome.

Hume, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Churchill, and John Quincy Adams constitute an “elite” of the intellect whose members, it should be clear from their piercing remarks on Islam, would today agree not with those who currently pass for our “elites” but, rather, with the people whom James Traub dismisses – agree, that is, that there is ample justification for the deep anxiety the masses feel about the place of Islam in Europe’s future. So which “elite” should we heed? That of today’s faceless Brussels bureaucrats, and the smug disembodied voices on the BBC, the members of the political and media establishments in Europe who for years have refused to acknowledge the nature of Islam, and continue to defame those who do as “islamophobes” and “far-right” and “racists,” or should we favor that other “elite” from the intelligent past whose members comprehended Islam all too well?

To my mind it is obvious which of those “elites” understood the meaning and menace of Islam, which means countenancing, and in Europe voting for, the “populist” parties that, James Traub tells us, only the “ignorant masses” could possibly support.

What about you?

First published in