

Sightings 10/23/06

A Muslim Pope Luther?

-- Martin E. Marty

Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, a.k.a. Paracelsus, was challenged by authorities who called him the Luther of medicine. "Why do you call me a medical Luther?... I leave it to Luther to defend what he says, and I will be responsible for what I say." I thought about P.A.T.B.v.H. this week while reading columns on what today's public Islam lacks. In the *New York Times* (October 15) Nicholas D. Kristof's headline read "Looking for Islam's Luthers," but a few days earlier Thomas L. Friedman, writing on "Islam and the Pope," yearned for a Muslim pope to define the faith and speak up for Islam (September 29). Jonah Goldberg, in *USA Today*, simply urged, "Islam needs a central authority -- such as a pontiff" (Sept. 25). Muslims need a strong authority, a clamper down.

Paracelsus thought Luther should take care of his own affairs, and I think the pope would ask Muslims to take care of their own. Meanwhile, one might find it interesting that in the same week(s), Luther and the pope were invoked as the two models for solutions to a Muslim problem. The great antagonists had so little in common; to Luther the pope was "Antichrist," and he was replied to in kind.

Kristof does well to point to anti-misogynist Islamic traditions and contemporary expressions in Islam. He focuses only on women here. Muslim feminists quote chapter and verse in the Qur'an and later writings to show that the ruling parties and persons in most of Islamdom call for reform, and they find texts to back them.

Friedman is frustrated that we do not hear "honest dialogue between Muslims and Muslims" to counter current activities in which Muslims blow up Muslim buildings. "Part of the problem ... is that Islam has no hierarchy. There is no Muslim pope defining the faith," and in the chaos of competing and usually irresponsible voices, Friedman sees only catastrophe ahead. More stridently, Jonah Goldberg reveals a real hunger for authority. He accuses those who wish for a "Muslim Martin Luther" of being left-leaners, which is not the direction in which Goldberg leans. He also says Luther was not a liberator but someone who wanted a more reactionary pope, not a freeing one.

Goldberg swings and swipes so far that those might take note who worry that someone somewhere is hinting that there are any kind of equivalencies between some Muslim and some non-Muslim movements. "While enormous theological and historical differences shouldn't be overlooked, today's Islamic fundamentalists have quite a lot in common with [Protestant types]." Lutherans and other Protestants did not bother to challenge Goldberg as he implied that there are equivalencies between Lutherans and Muslim fundamentalists.

Goldberg's rewriting of sixteenth-century history properly notes that often Protestants did beat up Protestants, but he does not list the papal forces among the slaughterers. Goldberg's is a bizarre history that minimizes medieval and Reformation impulses to kill in the name of papal

authority. We have kinder, gentler popes now, but Goldberg seeks authority, someone who can "clamp down." Ouch.

How ecumenical: a call for Lutheran Papists or Papal Lutherans for Muslims.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.