

When is Cultural Criticism \223Racism?\224

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Mitt Romney is a diplomatic disaster, but I do want to defend one comment he made on his summer travels that has been unjustly attacked. He commented on the cultural differences between the Israelis and the Palestinians that account for their economic disparities. He was immediately called a \223racist\224 by the Palestinians, a cry launched at any who dare do cultural criticism.

A distinguished historian, Tom Holland, just produced a documentary on \223The Untold Story of Islam,\224 in line with his histories of Medieval Europe and Rome. Now British Channel 4 has cancelled the program because of abusive Muslim protests, threatening the historian\222s life. They accuse him of racism and disrespect for Islam.

Racism is indeed stupid; it poses the notion that some very superficial cosmetic differences among human groups (skin color, eye shape, hair type) account for the great differences in human advancement. There are differences among and between groups of humans that have to do with physical elements, as the Olympic games so well illustrated. But even these physical differences do not mandate success or failure in a particular activity. Not all people with black skins can be runners, nor are they unable to be swimmers or astro-physicists. Race is not the same as talent.

Cultures, on the contrary, are not innate to any group. Cultures, like human rights, do not come from God (or nature), but are human creations. We are minimally controlled by instinct, but instead learn through trial and error, cause and effect. Those with a culture suited to the challenges of their environment thrive; those with a bad culture die off. At least they used to die off, but today, we have a concerned world community that intervenes to save bad cultures from themselves.

Cultures that thrive make use of their more intelligent members, recognize dead ends, and learn from others what works and what doesn\222t. Rigid cultures that engage in bad practices do not meet challenges well. But when these bad practices are entangled with religion, a system governed by righteous belief, meeting challenges is even more difficult.

What Mr. Romney said about the Palestinian failure to thrive was a cultural, not racial, observation. Although he did not amplify this statement, others, including Arab intellectuals themselves, have done so:

\225 Corruption, both political and financial, has long dogged not only the Palestinians, but the Arab world at large. Corruption is a human institution, and it persists until law, exposure by a free press, and cultural distaste for corruption is part of the culture.

\225 Disdain and suppression of women is a cultural (and religious) choice that dooms a culture to very slow development. Using women only as babymakers gives a culture numbers, but with neither quality nor the ability to feed and run such population explosion.

\225 Religious intolerance goes hand-in-hand with intolerance toward ideas. This intolerance has burgeoned during the Arab turmoil and it has been driving the most economically vibrant group from the Muslim world: its Christians. The Jews were expelled 60 years ago. The Christians are leaving now.

\225 A culture of vengeance does not lead to political stability or a thriving economy. Indeed, life under an occupation is no bed of roses; however, when Gaza was given an opportunity to run itself, it destroyed every element of economic advancement (its flower industry and tourism). And the vengeance taken against fellow Palestinians (pursuit and murder of PLO members) has killed any possibility of a lasting union.

\225 Rule of law is not part of the Palestinian culture. The strong man rules. His law is the law. We have seen no exception yet.

\225 An appalling death cult encourages young men to suicide/murder and families to murder women (honor killings) for supposed sexual misbehavior. Hamas\222 member of parliament, Fathi Hammad, said on television in 2008 that \223We desire death like you (Israelis) desire life.\224 This refers to using women, mujahideen and children as human shields in fighting Israelis.

How does one get a modern, thriving society this way? It has nothing to do with racism.

671 words

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