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Fitna

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Fitna

Abstract

This is a review of *Fitna* (2008).

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Fitna is a 17-minute film made by Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician, and is available free of charge on Google Video and YouTube. The term “fitna” is usually described by historians of Islam as a period of trials or temptations that threatens the unity of the Muslim community. The First Fitna in Islamic history refers to the period after the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman, and the subsequent conflict over Ali’s right to rule, which eventually led to the schism of the Muslim community into Sunnite and Shi’ite branches. Wilders’ film, of course, does not refer to a period of civil strife within the Muslim community. Rather, the film makes the argument that Muslims are causing fitna within the Western world. In other words, according to Wilders, Islam is causing disagreement and division in the West and is fundamentally threatening its cultural unity.

After Wilders finished making the film, he tried to find a venue to screen it. Dutch television stations refused, and satellite companies would not carry it, even for a fee. The Dutch government spent weeks attempting to stop the release of the film. The Prime Minister of the Netherlands himself told Wilders that the film could put the country’s soldiers in harms way while fighting abroad. In the face of such opposition, the defiant Wilders released the film on the British video site, LiveLeak.com. The website soon pulled the film after several staff members received threats, but has since decided to repost it.

Fitna contains much disturbing footage from September 11th, the Madrid train bombings, the London bombings of July 2005, and a particularly gruesome scene depicting the beheading of American contractor Eugene Armstrong in 2004. These scenes are interspersed with quotations from the *Qur'an* as well as speeches from radical Muslim leaders spewing hatred for the West. Many of these clips have been seen before in full-length anti-Islam films such as, *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West* (2006) and *Islam: What the West Needs to Know* (2007). The film also shows clips of radical Muslim leaders preaching anti-Semitism and homophobia. One clip, present in almost all the recent anti-Islam films, is of an adorable three-year-old girl in a white-as-snow hijab being interviewed by another woman. The woman asks the girl to describe how Jews can best be characterized. The little girl answers that they are apes and pigs. The woman then asks, "Who said they are so?" to which the little girl responds, "Allah...in the *Koran*."

Fitna contains similar video montage sequences and uses the material as commentary on Islam in contemporary world. Commentary by the makers of the film is not present until the very end. The film progresses systematically from showing the Muslim community to be violent, against Western values, and dead-set on global takeover to showing that the population of Muslims in places like the Netherlands, and Europe as a whole, has drastically increased since the 1990s. When a chart flashes on the screen showing that the population of Muslims in the

Netherlands has increased from less than fifteen hundred in 1960 to over 900,000 in 2004 or that the population of Muslims in Europe was around 54 million in 2007, the viewer is, one would assume, expected to be concerned, especially after having watched earlier parts of the film. The commentary at the end of the film states, “Muslims want you to make way for Islam, but Islam does not make way for you. The government insists that you respect Islam, but Islam has no respect for you... In 1945, Nazism was defeated in Europe. In 1989, communism was defeated in Europe. Now, the Islamic ideology has to be defeated. Stop Islamisation. Defend our freedom.”

As this statement makes clear, the underlying objective of the film is, indeed, to force the West to rethink its immigration policies. Wilders is the founder and leader of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, and favors restricting immigration into the Netherlands, especially from non-Western countries. In many interviews prior to and after the release of the film, he has defended his belief that Islam is the greatest threat to the survival of Western culture. He acknowledges that most Muslims in Europe and America are peaceful people. However, he states that “it really doesn't matter that much, because if you don't define your own culture as the best” and demand assimilation, it will only be a matter of time before you “lose your own identity and your own culture.” Wilders argues, in an interview with Fox

News, that he is not a cultural relativist, that he believes “our culture is far better than the retarded Islamic culture.”

For Wilders, the *Qur'an* itself is to blame. He tells *The Wall Street Journal* that the *Qur'an* does not promote moderate Muslims. “According to the *Qur'an*, there are no moderate Muslims. It's not Geert Wilders who's saying that, it's the *Qur'an*...saying that.” However, he does believe that those Muslims who are dedicated to assimilating into Western culture, and those who do not “subscribe to the full part of the *Qur'an*” should be encouraged and brought into the discussion. Alas, his plan to encourage these moderate Muslims includes a stipulation that is unlikely to be very popular among devout Muslims: “You have to give up this stupid, fascist book. This is what you have to do. You have to give up that book.”

Fitna created much international reaction, most of which was short-lived. One interesting consequence was the fact that Jordanian justice authorities began preparing a criminal case against Wilders because of his film. Aside from such legal action, *Fitna* has produced many reactionary films. One of these, *Schism*, created by Saudi blogger Raed Al-Saeed, contains the subtitle, “*The Bible version of Fitna*” (2008). The film, like *Fitna*, intersperses verses from the Judeo-Christian scriptures with images of American soldiers beating up Arabs, and clips of children speaking about “being God’s army” taken from *Jesus Camp* (2006). A second film, *Al Mouftinoun* (2008), released by the Arab European League (based in the

Netherlands) accuses Wilders of racism, and states that hateful passages can be taken from any holy book. It also argues that the West needs to be more mindful of the socio-political contexts that often give rise to Muslim anger. A third popular film, *Beyond Fitna* (2008), was released by the non-governmental organization “Islam and Christianity” and begins with a much more ecumenical message. It shows footage of Iranian Jews and Iranian Christians in prayer, and highlights verses in the *Qur'an* that praise Jesus and Moses as prophets. However, it too attempts to counteract the portrayal of Islam in Wilders’ film by showing footage of Christians committing atrocities, as well as interviews with fundamentalist Christians stating that Islam is a false or pagan religion that was inspired by Satan.

As is clear, inter-religious dialogue (and anger) are increasingly being expressed in film. Muslim reaction to *Fitna* did take to the streets and the courts, and Geert Wilders has received many threats to his life. However, as Wilders had hoped, a larger response actually came from the release of more short films. Through venues such as Google Video and YouTube, amateur film makers with little or no budget responded to what they believed to be the unfair and racist statements of a Dutch politician.

Scholars of religion should view these films for several reasons. Firstly, since they are being widely circulated and viewed online, professors will likely be asked about them in the classroom. Secondly, there has been, since September 11th,

the birth of what can only be called a “genre” of anti-Islam and anti-Christian films. Scholars of religion cannot dismiss these films. As Stuart Hall has noted, popular culture can often be the site of power struggles between groups in society. It is necessary to develop a better sense of how these films affect the dialogue between Islam and the West in the post-9/11 world.