PBS: MISSIONARY FOR ISLAM?

by Daniel Pipes

[Editor's note: This relevant editorial was forwarded by email. I do not have permission to reprint it but, due to its nature, I judge that the author would want it distributed widely. I watched this program on PBS along with a three-part series on "Islam: Empire of Faith" which presents a totally white-washed revision of history with everything in favor of Islam. Most every mention of Christianity was to demean it but there was not a word of criticism of Islam -- only highest praise. I wrote a letter to the local station in protest and have received no response. Daniel Pipes, writing for Jewish World Review, has written a masterful piece here. You may wish to keep it to send to your PBS station as an advance protest if they schedule another showing of these sickening programs. -Cecil Hook]

What would be the best way to convert lots of Americans to Islam?

Forget print, go to film. Put together a handsome documentary with an original musical score that presents Islam's prophet Muhammad in the most glowing manner, indeed, as a model of perfection. Round up Muslim and non-Muslim enthusiasts to endorse the nobility and truth of his message. Splice in vignettes of winsome American Muslims testifying to the justice and beauty of their Islamic faith. Then get the U. S. taxpayer to help pay for it.

Show it at prime time on the most high-minded TV network. Oh, and screen it at least once during the holidays, when anyone out of synch with Christmas might be especially susceptible to another religion's appeal.

This is precisely what the producers of "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet" have done. In a documentary The Washington Post calls "absorbing, . . . enjoyable and informative," exotic images of the desert and medieval miniatures mix with scenes of New York City and the American flag. Born-and convert-American Muslims speak affectingly about their personal bond to their prophet.

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) will premiere this two-hour documentary across the nation tomorrow night, then repeat it in most areas. The film's largest tranche of funding comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress that in fiscal 2002 received \$350 million in taxpayers' funds.

The heart of the film consists of nine talking heads competing with each other to praise Muhammad the most extravagantly. Not one of them criticizes him.

Some of their efforts are laughable, as when one commentator denies allegations about

Muhammad contracting a marriage of convenience with a rich, older woman named Khadija: "He deeply, deeply loved Khadija." Oh, and his many marriages were "an act of faith, not of lust." How could anyone know this?

Other apologetics are more consequential. What Muhammad did for women, viewers learn, was "amazing" - his condemning female infanticide, giving legal rights to wives, permitting divorce and protecting their inheritance rights. But no commentator is so impolite as to note that however admirable this was in the 7th century, Muslim women today suffer widely from genital mutilation, forced marriages, purdah [women being hidden from public view], illiteracy, sexual apartheid, polygamy and honor killings.

The film treats religious beliefs - such as Muhammad's "Night Journey," when the Quran says he went to heaven and entered the divine presence -as historical fact. It presents Muslim wars as only defensive and reluctant, which is simply false. All this smacks of a film shown by missionaries.

Move to the present and the political correctness is stifling Hostility is said to be "hurled" at American Muslims since 9/11 - but there's no mention about the prior and vastly greater

(foreign) Muslim hostility "hurled" at Americans, killing several thousand. The narrator exaggerates the number of American Muslims, overestimates their rate of growth and wrongly terms them the country's "most diverse" religious community.

But these are details. "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet" is an outrage on two main counts.

PBS has betrayed its viewers by presenting an airbrushed and uncritical documentary of a topic that has both world historical and contemporary significance. Its patronizing film might be fine for an Islamic Sunday school class, but not for a national audience.

For example, PBS ignores an ongoing scholarly reassessment of Muhammad's life that disputes every detail - down to the century and region Muhammad lived in - of its film. This is especially odd when contrasted with the 1998 PBS documentary, "From Jesus to Christ," which focuses almost exclusively on the work of cutting-edge scholars and presents the latest in critical thinking on Jesus.

The U. S. government should never fund a documentary whose obvious intent is to glorify a religion and proselytize for it. Doing so flies in the face of American tradition and law. On behalf of taxpayers, a public-interest law firm should bring suit against the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, both to address this week's travesty and to win an injunction against any possible repetitions. (End of article)

(Cecil Hook; January 2003) []