

Palin goes too far, again



Sarah Palin addresses the crowd at the 2014 National Rifle Association's annual meeting on Saturday, April 26. She shocked both liberal and conservative commentators when she said, "Well, if I were in charge, they would know that waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists."

By David M. Perry: May 1, 2014

Last Saturday, Sarah Palin stood before the huge crowd at the 2014 National Rifle Association annual meeting and condemned liberals for coddling terrorists. She loaded her speech with religious metaphors, claiming that true leaders would put "the fear of God in our enemies." She said, "They obviously have information on plots to carry out jihad. Oh, but you can't offend them, can't make them feel uncomfortable, not even a smidgen. Well, if I were in charge, they would know that waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists."

Palin's invocation of forced baptism shocked both conservatives and liberals, inspiring few defenders. Christian commentators, in particular, focused on her link between torture and baptism.

On Wednesday, the National Religious Campaign against Torture released a powerful condemnation of the speech. To Palin, the organization's executive director wrote, "Your statements play into a false narrative conveying that somehow, the conflict between the United States and the terrorist cells is a conflict between Christianity and Islam, or Islam and 'the West.' "

The group's letter to the NRA, signed by 17 faith leaders from many different religions and denominations, reads, "For Christians, baptism is a profoundly holy act. It is in stark contrast to the abhorrent act of waterboarding. Equating baptism to an act of torture like waterboarding is sacrilegious -- and particularly surprising coming from a person who prides herself on her Christian faith."

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But it's not actually all that surprising. Palin's public rhetoric relies on crafting existential binaries between "us" and "them," creating a kind of sacred empowered victimhood among her listeners. She draws from the language of militant Christianity to claim the status of both persecutor and persecuted. This is not an accident, and I do not believe she will repudiate her remarks.

I'm an historian. While people of faith such as the National Religious Campaign against Torture are concerned about blasphemy, I worry about history. When powerful Christians such as Palin start speaking about forced baptism to a cheering throng, they evoke, intentionally or not, some of the worst episodes in Christian history. Here's one.

On Valentine's Day 1349, the citizens of Strasbourg, Germany, rose up against the Jewish population of their city. The Chronicle of Mathias of Neuenburg describes it as follows:

"And so, on the following Saturday (February 14), the Jews were conducted to the cemetery to be burnt in a specifically prepared house. And 200 of them were completely stripped of their clothes by the mob, who found a lot of money in them. But the few who chose baptism were spared, and many beautiful women were persuaded to accept baptism, and many children were baptized after they were snatched from mothers who refused this invitation. All the rest were burnt, and many were killed as they leaped out of the fire."

This is just one of the many examples of forced baptism of Jews and Muslims under threat of massacre. Notice the specifics. The Jews were forced into a building, stripped, robbed and burned alive. Their only pathway out was through baptism and rape. As parents died, babies were taken from their mothers to be baptized.

The church condemned these practices, but if someone went into a church and was baptized, even under threat of death, it counted. Such issues led to the terrible excesses of the Spanish Inquisition in which forcibly converted Jews and Muslims were held under constant scrutiny and suspicion.

When Palin stood before the huge crowd of mostly white people, she told her audience to be afraid and to be prepared for civilian violence. She spoke about "that evil Muslim terrorist Maj. (Nidal) Hasan ... his Allah Akbar (sic) praising jihad." She said, "Ammo is expensive, don't waste a bullet on a warning shot." She divided the world between "us" and "them," with no room for dialogue. At one point she pretended to apologize for saying all liberals were hypocrites, then joked, redrawing the divisive line, "I'm kidding, yes they are."

Finally, she said, "If I were in charge," and paused to let crowd cheer. Then, with great deliberation, she linked a torture method that makes the sufferer feel like they are dying to the ritual of Christian inclusion. The crowd went wild. "Thank God," she said, "more and more Americans are waking up." I don't read her invocation of a deity as accidental. For Palin, this is a holy struggle.

Last Sunday wasn't the first time Palin used rhetoric invoking one of the worst chapters of Christian history. In January 2011, in the wake of the Gabrielle Giffords shooting in Arizona, she and some right-wing defenders used the term "blood libel" to describe those linking the shooting to Palin's martial rhetoric. (She had used on her website a map with cross hairs on Giffords' district).

Blood libel refers to the medieval myth that Jews murdered Christian children in religious rituals and baked their blood into matzos for Passover. It's a myth that has resulted in massacres of Jews for centuries.

I appreciate the efforts of the National Religious Campaign against Torture and others to contest this language in public. We can't pretend, though, that Palin's invocation was an aberration or that her status as a failed politician makes her irrelevant. The crowd was cheering; then they went into the exhibition hall to buy weapons.

Sarah Palin and her followers want it both ways. They are the persecuted chosen people of God, targeted by lies and threatened with violence by those who do not share their faith. They are also the Christian triumphalists, ready for a Day of Reckoning in which all will be converted or destroyed.

This is not a joke or an accident. This is not new rhetoric. And it never ends well.
