

press, which displayed reports of civilian casualties more prominently than the U.S. news media did, gave more credence to such Taliban claims.

In January the Associated Press did a painstaking on-the-scene reconstruction. Laura King, an AP special correspondent, poured over hospital records, visited bomb-

ing sites, interviewed eyewitnesses and officials, and coordinated reports from fellow AP reporters elsewhere in Afghanistan. Cautioning that the figure King arrived at still was not definitive, Fleeson writes that “the February 11 story concluded that the civilian death toll probably ranged from 500 to 600.”

Misreading the Arab ‘Street’

“Media Coverage of the Gallup Poll of ‘The Islamic World’” (Mar. 6, 2002), National Council on Public Polls’ Polling Review Board, www.ncpp.org/islamic_world.htm; “The Poll That Didn’t Add Up” by Richard Morin and Claudia Deane, *The Washington Post* (Mar. 23, 2002), 1150 15th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20071.

“In poll, Islamic world says Arabs not involved in 9/11.” That was the shocking headline on the front page of *USA Today* on February 27. Reporting on a Gallup poll of residents in nine predominantly Muslim countries, the article noted (as did reports from other news organizations) that 53 percent of the respondents viewed the United States unfavorably and that only 18 percent in the six countries that let Gallup ask the question believed that Arabs carried out the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Shocking proof that the Muslim world hates America? Hardly.

The National Council on Public Polls, a leading professional watchdog organization, called the Gallup study “important and fascinating,” but faulted *USA Today* and Cable Network News (CNN) for making it seem (as did other news organizations) to be a study of “the Muslim world.” Only about 40 percent of the world’s Muslim population lives in the nine surveyed countries (Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco,

EXCERPT

Who Needs the Evening News?

Defenders of evening-news broadcasts tend to describe them as a redoubt of sobriety and responsibility in a “news environment” dominated by loudmouthed punditry (think Chris Matthews and Bill O’Reilly) and gross sensationalism. And in a sense, critics say much the same thing: that the problem with the nightly news is that it’s too dull and dowdy to compete.

*Having recently spent three weeks as one of the 25 million or so Americans who watch the networks’ flagship broadcasts (a habit that, like many millions of other Americans, I gave up long ago), I have a news flash for both sides: If the network news divisions think they are producing an evening broadcast so noble that it deserves to be defended from the corporate huns, they’re kidding themselves. And if the evening news isn’t dramatic enough for those corporate honchos, it’s not for lack of trying. It’s not just the much-noted increase in “soft” news features that now eats up a large portion of each broadcast; even the hard news now comes with a hard sell in which emotional impact trumps intellectual content with appalling consistency. The evening anchors may still look and talk like paragons of wisdom and integrity right out of our nostalgia-clouded memory of *The Good Old Days*, but their broadcasts are something else.*

—Rob Walker, a columnist for *Slate*, in *The New Republic* (May 20, 2002)

Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia). Not all of the 10,000 respondents were Muslims, or even citizens of the countries in which they were residing. Four excluded countries (India, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Nigeria) each have more Muslim residents than many of the countries included.

The dismaying overall figures cited by the news media, the council points out, were the averages for the countries without regard to the size of their Muslim populations. Thus, Kuwait, with fewer than two million Muslims, was treated the same as Indonesia, with more than 200 million. Yet 36 percent

of those interviewed in Kuwait regarded the September 11 terrorist attacks as morally justified, while only four percent of Indonesians did.

Though the council spanked only *USA Today* and CNN, it “could just as easily” have given a whack or two to the Gallup Organization, observe Morin and Deane, director and assistant director, respectively, of polling at *The Washington Post*. “As Gallup now acknowledges, it initially provided reporters with the sensational [overall figures] that were the primary target of [the council’s] criticism.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Hitler’s Faith

“Totalitarianism: Between Religion and Science” by Tzvetan Todorov, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (Summer 2001), Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., Crown House, 47 Chase Side, London N14 5BP, England.

What keeps utopian dreamers dreaming (and scheming) is their certain belief that perfection can be attained in this world. Alas, it is this conviction that led in the past century to the enslavement and slaughter of millions upon millions, and to misery for countless others.

The totalitarianism of Hitler, Lenin, and others, writes Todorov, the research director of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, is a species of utopianism. “When seen in the perspective of European history, utopianism is in turn revealed as an atheistic millennialism.”

The Christian millennial movements that sprang up beginning in the 13th century held, contrary to traditional Christian teaching, that the Messiah would appear imminently to establish his kingdom on earth and that believers would achieve salvation in this world. The totalitarian “isms” were millennial movements that replaced God with the doctrine of scientism—an “excrescence on the body of science” whose origins Todorov traces to René Descartes (1596–1650). “Scientism takes as its point of departure a hypothesis about the structure of the world—that it is entirely coherent. Thus, as though the world were transparent, it can be known by human reason. . . . No part of the world—material, spiritual, animate, or inanimate—can escape the grasp of science.”

Scientism, explains Todorov, “rests on the existence of science, but it is not in itself scientific. Its underlying assumption, the total transparency of reality, cannot be proved or disproved. . . . At both its foundations and its summit, scientism demands an act of faith. . . . This is why totalitarian regimes can adopt scientism without necessarily encouraging scientific research. They have good reason not to since this would require submission solely to the quest for truth rather than to dogma.”

One of the first thinkers to see the implications of scientism was the French philologist Ernst Renan. In his remarkable *Philosophical Dialogue* (1871), he envisioned a world ruled by “positivist tyrants,” endowed by reason and science with the power to divine the rules of nature and extend them over all of society. “The being who possesses science puts limitless terror into the service of truth,” Renan declared. Leaders should have at their disposal men who were “obedient machines, indifferent to moral repugnance and capable of every type of ferocity.”

The allure of such visions is that they promise to give meaning and purpose to human life, Todorov observes. “Democracy does not fulfill the need for salvation or for the absolute; it cannot, on the other hand, afford to disregard its existence.”