

**The religious superiority complex**  
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**Michael Kinsley**

I knew that my god was bigger than his," said Lieut. General William Boykin, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, referring to a Somali warlord he once crossed swords with. The echo of a famous dog-food commercial was unintentional, we must hope. Presumably, Boykin's God does not eat Ken-L Ration. But maybe Boykin does so himself, because he's a mighty frisky fella.

Boykin was caught on videotape speaking to church groups and saying things like, "The enemy is a guy called Satan." And, "They're after us because we're a Christian nation." Now--like so many Christian soldiers before him, sent to distant lands to bring the pagans around to our point of view--he's in hot water. Only this time it's the forces of Western civilization, not the natives, who want him for lunch.

Among other problems, Boykin's theo-babble muddies the waters of moral outrage over the latest rantings by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, whose mouth is like a radio station where the anti-Semitic golden oldies never stop. Jews "rule the world by proxy." They "invented socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong." (Figure that one out!) The media don't report his criticism of Muslims, he explained, because Jews control the media. And so on. In fact, until the last outburst, Mahathir got great press as a supposedly moderate Muslim leader, although his views on Jews are not new. He was President Bush's poster boy for Muslim moderation.

Bush's moral outrage at both Mahathir and Boykin has been oddly muted. He claims to have told Mahathir that saying Jews succeed at the expense of Muslims is "wrong and divisive." Mahathir claims that Bush only apologized in private for having to criticize him in public, "unless my hearing is very bad." Which, he tartly added, it isn't. About Boykin, Bush said that the general's remarks "didn't reflect my opinion." The Pentagon has begun an official investigation into Boykin's remarks. What there is to investigate is a puzzle.

Everyone who gets caught in one of these ethno-controversies privately believes that he or she is being punished for having had the guts to tell a harsh truth. Any apology he or she coughs up, as Boykin did, only reinforces this feeling. No doubt even Mahathir has friends and sycophants who are telling him, "Mo, you're just a victim of political correctness. What is this world coming to when a simple Prime Minister can't say the Jews control everything without people making a ridiculous fuss?"

Bush ought to be furious at Boykin, because, until now, greater understanding and embrace of Islam have been real achievements of the Bush Administration. Even as America's victory in the Iraq war turns to ash, Bush can take pride that Americans have a greater appreciation that Muslims and their religion add to the richness of our great ethnic stew. And without Bush's special emphasis, the opposite might easily have happened.

At the same time, Bush has described the war on terror from the beginning in Manichaeian terms not all that different from Boykin's. "Today, our nation saw evil," he said on Sept. 11, 2001. "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them," he told the nation nine days later. Boykin may be understandably perplexed about what line he crossed by referring to evil as "a guy called

Satan."

As a devout believer, Boykin may also wonder why it is impermissible to say that the God you believe in is superior to the God you don't believe in. I wonder this same thing as a nonbeliever: Doesn't one religion's gospel logically preclude the others'? (Except, of course, where they overlap with universal precepts, such as not murdering people, that even we nonbelievers can wrap our heads around.) Although Boykin's version of Christianity seems less like monotheism than the star of a high school polytheism tournament, his basic point is that Christianity is right and Islam is wrong. Doesn't the one imply the other? Pretending that my religion is no better than your religion may make for fewer religious wars, but it seems contrary to the very idea of religion. For this, you take a leap of faith?

Boykin's mistake was to put all these pieces together, implying that Islam itself is not merely mistaken but evil. Talking like this while in a U.S. military uniform was also pretty tactless. Mahathir's mistake, by contrast, was to open his trap at all.

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