

## The Forum

# Purification starts with the truth

Catholics. Lutherans. Muslims. Americans. We all need a moment of self-reflection to process our transgressions and move forward toward a better self. And this doesn't mean dilution.

By James Reston Jr.

This is the season for historical purification. All over the world, religions and nations seem ready to peek into the dark places of their histories, to learn from the atrocities of the past and thus to experience a kind of collective catharsis. It is an imperfect process, but the press for it is undeniable. In Australia the prime minister formally apologized for the past treatment of the aboriginal population. In America there is similar talk about slavery and torture. Turkey struggles with the stain of Armenian genocide a century ago. Islam battles with the association of jihad with mass murder. But the nexus between purification and apology makes the process delicate.

Historical purification as a concept began, in recent history, with the Roman Catholic Church during the 1990s. In the church's run-up to the millennial year of 2000, Pope John Paul II coined the phrase when he announced that the church would reconsider the Galileo case. Would the church admit that a fundamental error had taken place in 1632? Would a pope, Urban VIII, or his inquisitor, Roberto Bellarmino, be charged with direct responsibility? Would the church apologize for forcing Galileo, under the threat of torture, to recant his view that the Earth revolved around the sun?

It took the Roman Church 13 years to reach a final conclusion. In the end, it did not apologize. It delivered a classic Washington-type expression of regret. Yes, mistakes were made, but no historical figure was identified as having made them. The movement for historical purification ended there.

One can only wonder what might have happened if the ultimate dark chapter of Catholic history, the Spanish Inquisition, had been opened up.

What if the Roman Church had publicly, honestly, and definitively con-

## Join live online chat

The author will discuss historical purification as it relates to religion during a live online chat at 11 a.m. ET on Tuesday. Submit your questions and comments for Reston at [onreligion.usatoday.com](http://onreligion.usatoday.com).

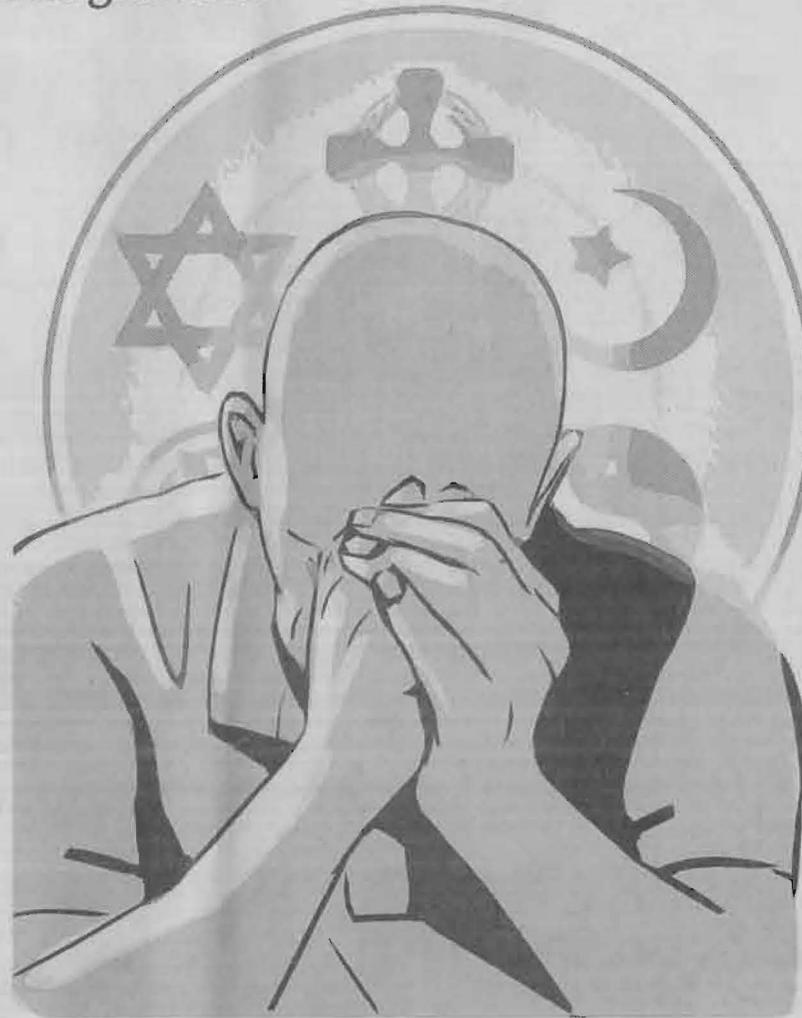
torture, including waterboarding? Would it have been so easy for an American system of torture to develop after 9/11?

Now the Lutheran Church is preparing to celebrate its own Jubilee. A "decade of Martin Luther" has been proclaimed in the run-up to the year 2017, the 500th anniversary of Luther's brazen act of nailing his 95 theses to the castle church door of Wittenberg, Germany, the act that sparked the Reformation. Each year of this Luther decade will be devoted to a single theme.

## The ugly history

The organizers worry especially about the year 2013 when the theme is "the Reformation and Tolerance." How will the Lutheran Church deal with Luther's rampant anti-Semitism, his vicious attacks on Mennonites and Anabaptists, or his attitude toward the Turks, Mohammed and Islam? How will the church grapple with the use the Nazis made of Luther's anti-Semitism? In 1933, Luther's very own church at Wittenberg was draped with Nazi flags, and the first archbishop of a Nazi religion was consecrated there. A few weeks ago when I was in Worms, Germany, a Lutheran minister told me that it would be "sheer idolatry" if the Luther Jubilee did not address these difficult and awkward episodes.

Against Luther's revolution the Holy



By Keith Simmons, USA TODAY

waged a 24-year war against Protestantism in an effort to expunge the heresy and impose a single Christian dogma on the Christian world. Luther was excommunicated and declared an "outlaw" by the Edict of Worms. The ancient ban against him "and all his followers" was proclaimed. That ban is still in effect.

Across the street from the Evangelical Church in Worms, I asked the provost of the imposing Romanesque Catholic cathedral about this. In the spirit of ecumenicalism, wouldn't it be a good idea to lift that ban on Luther's followers after nearly 500 years? The question, he replied, was "too emotional."

"The time has not yet arrived to lift the ban," said Monsignor Engelbert Preiss.

And so in the history of Christianity

torture being visited upon those who stray from the "true faith." Witness the crusades. A frank acknowledgement of these transgressions is only now beginning, largely because of the debate that has followed the 9/11 attacks.

President Obama faced this delicate balancing act when he visited the Middle East several weeks ago. In his effort to change the American relationship with the Muslim world, would he expressly apologize for the transgressions of Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, torture, wide-scale civilian casualties and rendition? "We must say openly the things we hold in our hearts," he told the Cairo audience, "and that are said only behind closed doors."

But he did not do that in his speech. Instead he tiptoed along a thin line by

expressly apologizing for them and without naming the perpetrators. He did not utter the most inflammatory name of all, George W. Bush.

## 'Historical dilution'

I would call this historical dilution rather than historical purification. Commentators on the American right seemed relieved that he did not expressly apologize. The reaction in the Middle East was tepid. His Muslim audience seemed to find our president a nice person with a good heart, certainly much nicer than his predecessor, and seemed satisfied with the notion of a new beginning. The speech, however, was not transformative or cathartic or, ultimately, purifying.

Of course, the Islamic world is in need of some purification of its own. Violence in the name of jihad is a defining theme of the past decade. With Sunni Islam, representing some 80% of the world's Muslims, no earthly authority such as the pope exists between the believer and his God. The relationship is direct and personal.

And so even the scholars at the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo who sponsored Obama's speech are loath to define a moral code for the individual believer. This gives wide latitude for grotesque perversions such as Osama bin Laden's bizarre fatwa calling on every Muslim "who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order" to kill Americans.

Several years ago I was able to coax out of Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, the grand imam of the Al-Azhar mosque, a strong denunciation of bin Laden and his followers. "They are not martyrs but aggressors," he said. "They will not achieve paradise, but receive severe punishment for their aggressions. . . . Whoever shall kill a man or a believer without right, the punishment is hell forever." But then a short time later, the grand imam refused to deliver a similar denunciation of suicide bombers.

As with the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, as with Obama's America, Islam's responsibility to purify its own history will lie with Islam itself. Perhaps all the world's great religions and countries need to take up the mantra of the Reformation: *Reformata et Semper Reformanda* (reformed and always reforming).

James Reston Jr. is author of the new book, *Defenders of the Faith: Charles V, Suleyman the Magnificent, and the Bat-*