

Time for a global Enlightenment

Wednesday, May 25, 2005

Moira Rayner

Facts are irrelevant in a catharsis. Though it is perfectly clear that *Newsweek's* 9 May report that US interrogators of Muslim suspects in Guantanamo Bay had flushed a Koran down a toilet was crap, fifteen Afghans have so far died in riots over the supposed desecration and scores more have been injured in Pakistan, Indonesia and other Muslim countries; a group of Afghan clerics have demanded a holy war against the US unless it hands the malefactors over, and there is to be a global day of protest on 27 May, involving twenty five leading Islamic organizations including Hamas, Hezbollah, PAS of Malaysia and the Muslim brotherhood of Egypt.

The surge of rage and violence has frightened even the Pentagon and Condoleeza Rice. *Newsweek* has said sorry, but, 'By insulting the Koran, they have challenged our beliefs,' according to Jafiz Hussain Ahmed, a top official of the religious alliance at a protest rally in Islamabad. 'It has happened due to the liberal and progressive policies of Western-influenced Muslim rulers.'

Time for a global Enlightenment, or we're all doomed.

Religion is an institutionalised system of ritual, myths and behavioural requirements, which derives its power from being bundled up with quasi-historical events. It is the story of faith, not faith: a knot of metaphors and symbols and institutionalised traditions. Religion enables individuals to share their indescribable, numinous encounter with a divine presence, and its power is vast. I understand these riots. I've been in mass meetings in Pune and Perth, London and Rome and, my most recent numinous experience, in a Melbourne crowd (yes, it's our religion) watching Collingwood kick ass – and they were scary, unbearably exciting, and well nigh orgasmic in their exhilaration of oneness. Covenantors must have felt like this as they slaughtered papists in Scottish glens, and crusaders as they chopped heads and burned cities – and indeed, those thousands of good Germans caught up in the spectacle of Nuremberg.



Thanks to [Fiona Katauskas](#)

Desecration of the Koran is especially inflammatory to Muslims because it is a unique record of the revelations of a real, historical Mohammed, in his lifetime, of the faith that existed before Islam became a religion: that is, before it was interpreted by scholars, and before the religion became an

institution. It demands respect.

Nonetheless, it demands reason too. It has to be interpreted. Religious scholars seek to establish a workable interpretation of religious tradition, using reason and historical research about the times in which its myths arose, for modern circumstances. I was taught, as a Presbyterian kid, that though the Bible was holy, it was not a 'paper Pope'. That's why, despite respect for Exodus, most Christians don't stone adulterers, kill blasphemers, enslave their enemies' children or abstain from pork, today.

Every religion evolves. Mohammed's revelation of egalitarianism and moral accountability was revolutionary for the tribal society of his day. Religion is always redefined by following generations. Orthodoxy and divisions come too, along with competing interpretations, ideas, and communities of faith. When these are associated with war, dispossession, colonisation and cultural upheaval, not surprisingly religion becomes a rallying point of political and social definition. It becomes fixed. It becomes politically useful.

After September 11 2001, we slipped into the fearful view that this was a war between the modern democratic societies of the West, and barbaric, autocratic societies of the Middle East. It is has become greater, a confrontation between fundamentalisms and the progressive, pluralistic ideals of democratic government.

To some, democracy's failure to 'stick' in the Middle East is because Islamic culture itself is supposedly incompatible with enlightenment virtues such as liberalism, pluralism, individualism and respect for human rights. Islam is still being misused to rationalise totalitarian regimes, it is true, but it is also true that Western civilisation, supposedly secular, has a religious underbelly. One glance at the church-going proclivities and rhetoric of political leaders in the US – and here, too – should tell us that Protestant evangelism is still at work. And there are fundamentalists there, too.

Keith Windschuttle recently argued (in *Which Enlightenment*, a book review published in [New Criterion](#) on 23 March 2005), that understanding how religion, moral philosophy and egalitarian assumptions shaped the enlightenment in the English-speaking world is still important today, to help make sense of the blind forces tearing societies apart. He suggests that we have unconsciously assumed a British form of Enlightenment into our political philosophy. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, once wrote that, 'It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.' To overcome prejudice, passion, bigotry and wickedness, Wesley said, religion and reason must join. So the Methodists – and many other Protestant sects of the late 18th and 19th centuries – got stuck into education, science, medicine, literature, servicing the poor and prisoners, seeking to incorporate these

conjoined values into what we now call civil society. This unacknowledged value set underlies much of modern democratic governance today.

It may be hard for Westerners to imagine an Islamic democracy. We must not abandon the ideal. The western model is avowedly secular, but respects and does not eradicate, religion in public life. So did early Islam. What democracies do is secularise – that is, identify certain responsibilities as belonging to political, not theological, institutions. Australian anti-discrimination law, which I work with every day, is a good example. It both protects religious minorities from prejudice and injustice, and also exempts religious institutions and practices from most of its prohibitions as well, even if they excuse women's subjugation, privately advocate religious intolerance, and limit those who may participate in religious rites or the privileges of priesthood. Both protection and provision are essential elements of secular government.

In democratic societies, objection or disobedience of a law may not be blasphemous. In Australia, blasphemy and incitement to religious hatred are unlawful only because of their potential for violence and disorder. But it is a religious duty, too, not to force religious beliefs down others' throats: the Koran, for instance, explicitly directs that 'there can be no compulsion in religion.' Democratic societies are pluralist, even if they are shaped by religious traditions, whether Christian, Hindu or Islamic or something else. Civilised societies do not eradicate religion, but secularise their administrative arrangements, by thoughtful analysis and distinction between disparate civil and religious domains, on the one hand by government, and on the other by religious leaders who must acknowledge that, since religion arises out of a community of beliefs and practices that change as the community does, they too must constantly and rigorously re-evaluate their religious practices and the conduct of its adherents.

Religion is a kind of mirrored window into the realm of unknowing which in part reflects back those with interpretive authority who look into it. No wonder, then, those newly visible women surprise and offend the men who have dominated the prospect for so long. The (male) editor of Newsweek is still alive and working, as no doubt are those who wrote the story, and its source. But in Nigeria in 2002 when a young, female, British-trained journalism graduate called Isioma Daniel filed a story for *ThisDay* newspaper about the Miss World beauty pageant, she had a different experience.

Noting Muslim objections to the pageant as both insulting to women and offensively begun during Ramadan (in a Christian part of the country) she wrote, and her editor published: 'What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them.'

Hundreds of youths promptly went on the rampage, burning cars, buildings and attacking anyone thought

to be Christian; more than 200 people were killed, thousands were left homeless, the newspaper and her government blamed her and only her, she copped a Fatwa and is now living in exile, somewhere in Scandinavia.

For God's sake!

About the author

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Published Comments

What's your opinion? Tell us what you think by adding a comment to offer feedback on this story.

Islam is becoming a career for many people. You can write (fabricate) a bestseller book, gain permanent residency and become a celebrity. In fact you can become somebody overnight from just denigrating Islam. So is the new path to celebrity in the democratic, progressive and liberal societies of the West, including Australia.

The trends of dehumanising the 'others' are 'aimed at a receptive audience, who shares the perpetrators frame of reference, to exploit an overarching climate of fear and prejudice, and in the process encourage more racism and Islamophobia'. If you called it 'crap', you would be called "Unaustralian".

It is important to remember that despite all the violence perpetuated against Muslims by Christians (Bush, Blair and Howard, and their "intellectual" defenders are very proud Christians), Muslims remain composed and respectful of Christianity and Christians, with the few exemptions of orchestrated and politically motivated acts.

Just to mention one example of this deliberately perpetuated violence. From 1991-present, Christian forces led by the 'enlightened' Anglo-Saxon deliberately killed more than 2 million Iraqis, a third of them children under the age of 5, killed before they knew they are Muslims. As Professor Ward Churchill of the University of Colorado wrote, 'we find record of not a single

significant demonstration [in the West] protesting the wholesale destruction of Iraqi children'. All the perpetrators, including those who torture, abuse and rape of innocent Muslims in the new created Gulags, still alive and working, and no doubt are those who made the practice "legal".

Last week, a Sydney community "leader", did all he can (for himself) and travel to Baghdad in an effort to free an Australian Bechtel employee. While he was in Baghdad, 75 innocent Iraqis were killed. Hundreds of houses raided, 18 innocent Iraqi women and their children were abused and taken hostages (as bargaining chips) by "Christian Coalition Forces". Did you see/hear it on Australian media?

Finally, my experience of the Australian anti-discrimination law, via the Australia's HEOC, is that it is a government tool created not only as a PR, but also to legitimise institutionalised racism and streamlined it.

One can be sure that if Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez make complaints of racism and victimisation to the HREC, the finding will be: "no evidence of racism or discrimination". 'For God's sake!' we live in a 'tolerant' and 'fair country', where Keith Windschuttle and Alan Jones also live.

Islam is also becoming the preferred diet for NewMatilda. I am sure subscription will hit the sky soon.

Ghali Hassan

Ghali Hassan

Thursday, May 26, 2005

Moira Rayner admits in her first paragraph that Newsweek made up the story on disrespect to the Koran that resulted in the deaths of 15 Afghans and "a global day of protest on 27th May, involving twenty five leading Islamic organizations including Hamas, Hezbollah, PAS of Malaysia and the Muslim brotherhood of Egypt." Newsweek is sorry.

[By the way, I have just returned from a month overseas and read Newsweek on the plane. In three cases they quoted unnamed sources to show the US is an evil country and I have just read that 42 percent of Americans do not believe anything they read in the New York Times – 'All the news that is fit to print.' I am not the slightest bit surprised.]

She then doesn't mention Newsweek again until the end of her article when she says "The (male) editor of Newsweek is still alive and working, as no doubt are those who wrote the story, and its source." The implication is clear: journalist misconduct is gender based and men are not punished for it.

She is wrong on both counts, particularly that male journalists are not punished for soft-left ethics (lies IMHO). Dan Rather (CBS) and his entire research team, Eason Jordan (CNN's chief news executive), Piers Morgan (Editor of the UK's Daily Mirror), the BCC Chairman, and a reporter Andrew Gilligan, were on the footpath shortly after being loose with the truth. Peter Arnett, a correspondent for the NBC network was fired for praising Saddam for "being responsive to the [Iraqi] Government's requirements of discipline."

I am sure many New Matilda readers will see this as right-wing censorship, and more power to them, because we now live in a world where you can hold any opinion you want. But blogs (such as New Matilda – 8 million in the US alone) will hold you individually accountable for those opinions in the court of world public opinion.

Ms Rayner spends three pages justifying Islam as a peace-loving religion because it is "Time for a global Enlightenment, or we're all doomed." She then blows her entire argument with her last few paragraphs:

"But in Nigeria in 2002 when a young, female, British-trained journalism graduate called Isioma Daniel filed a story for This Day newspaper about the Miss World beauty pageant, she had a different experience. Noting Muslim objections to the pageant as both insulting to women and offensively begun during Ramadan (in a Christian part of the country) she wrote, and her editor published: 'What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them. 'Hundreds of youths promptly went on the rampage, burning cars, buildings and attacking anyone thought to be Christian; more than 200 people were killed, thousands were left homeless, the newspaper and her government blamed her and only her, she copped a Fatwa and is now living in exile, somewhere in Scandinavia."

"For God sake!" I couldn't agree more.

Brenton Groves
Thursday, May 26, 2005

Dear Moira, your article on 'Feminism, and getting it wrong,' of a few weeks back prompted a

comment but it got lost in the void somewhere. A risky thing to do but couldn't help quoting that we are told somewhere that 'woman was, after all, mere Adam's rib, a God image once removed.' Anyway, forgive that lapse.

This article prompted several re-readings and I found it of value. Thank you. But to admit that watching the male AFL male blood-sport (and barracking for Collingwood) got the juices flowing was a bit naughty, especially when in the same breath you quote the Methodist pieties of John Wesley.

Tut tut, I don't know that all that fresh air is good for one.

But I would watch the magpies with you anyway. Ta.

Milton moon
Friday, May 27, 2005