

# The secularization of blasphemy

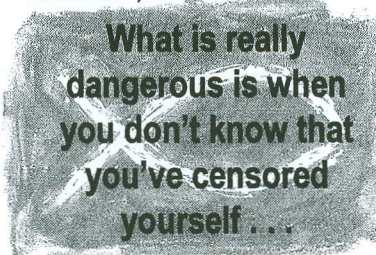
Jenny Taylor

The demise of free speech under the assault of Islamists in Britain is a fact. The culture has shifted as Lesslie Newbigin and Michael Polanyi saw it would under the impact of violence and its threat. English civilization is built on a doctrine of tolerance, hammered out in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which is different from the anti-religious variant of it which prevails on the continent after the demise of tyranny. This toleration is an active principle rooted in Christianity, it requires public assent, and it is never absolute.<sup>1</sup> 'Should the principles of unrestricted violence be generally accepted, the English could not survive' says Polanyi in a famous anglophile essay in *Political Quarterly* in 1943.

His words were prescient, but in ways he could not then have foreseen. The GfK NOP 2006 Social Research Survey on Muslim Attitudes carried out after the London tube bombings, indicated that only three per cent of 1,000 Muslims polled took a consistently pro-Freedom of Speech line on a range of questions given them about controversial issues. 73% said it was acceptable for religious or political groups to use violence.<sup>2</sup>

For the principles of unrestricted violence to prevail, violence is not necessary more than occasionally; the underlying menace of it is adequate to cause a chilling effect on what may be thought and said. Kenan Malik in his new book *From Fatwa to Jihad* says that in less than 20 years, liberal secularism has capitulated before the rage of Islam. Hanif Kureishi, author of the *Black Bag* says 'most people, most writers want to keep their head down, live a quiet life. They don't want a bomb in the letterbox. They have succumbed to the fear' (Malik 2009: 202).

According to Malik, Rushdie's critics may not have won the battle against the publication of *Satanic Verses* but they 'won the war by pounding into the liberal consciousness the belief that giving offence was morally despicable.' Such a belief (replacing the Christian doctrine of tolerance) makes it easier to *give* offence. The outcome is an internalisation of the fatwa, a form of self-censorship which has exactly the same effect as a physical ghetto: they limit one's freedom. The mental no-go areas of contemporary authorship are described by Monica Ali, who was attacked both by Muslims and the left (notably Germaine Greer) for *Brick Lane*. 'The way that Random House dropped *The Jewel of Medina* would have been unthinkable in the pre-Rushdie era' she believes. 'What is really dangerous is when you don't know that you've censored yourself . . . (cited in Malik 2009:197).



This is the secularization of blasphemy - and the irony was complete when Meurig Llwyd Williams, Anglican archdeacon of Bangor, was forced to resign after he included a drawing, reprinted from the French newspaper *Le Soir*, in the church paper *Y Llan*. It showed Muhammed sitting on a heavenly cloud with God and Buddha and being told: 'Don't complain - we've all been caricatured here.' All copies of the issue of the paper were pulped - by order of the Church.

'Libel tourism' is a further manifestation of

freedom's retreat. Foreign businessmen like the Saudi Khalid Bin Mafouz retain UK libel lawyers to stifle publication of books or articles that investigate the links between gulf oil money and terrorism. The clearest recent British example of this was the law suit against Cambridge University Press which resulted in the removal from the bookshelves of *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World* by J. Mullard Burr and Robert Collins. CUP issued a full apology to avoid a suit. Lawyers in the US acting for Saudi-backed Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) have been on a long march through the UN to ban 'defamation of religion' in the name of anti-racism and, in 2008, in the name of the recently more fashionable 'religious discrimination'.<sup>3</sup>

But Muslim opportunists are merely capitalising on the opportunism of the left whose residue, political correctness, is still with us. 'On some issues we will find ourselves on the same side as the Islamists against imperialism and the state' wrote the Jewish atheist Chris Harman, Editor of Socialist Worker in an essay for Marxism Online in 1994. 'Where the Islamists are in opposition, our rule should be, "with the Islamists sometimes, with the state never".'<sup>3</sup>

The 'crying wolf' about truth and freedom in which the left indulged for decades is what Polanyi described as 'the inversion of morality': 'a fierce moral protest made in terms of a fantastic immorality' which caused our present disorientation. The solution he believed was 'to re-establish the grounds of human knowledge as 'personal knowledge'.

And strangely, the secular Muslim writer Kenan Malik agrees. 'The uncertain-

ties and insecurities of Western societies about the worth of basic liberal values . . . have made Islamists appear more potent than they are'. He calls for a recovery of our cultural instincts.

Those instincts are derived from the struggles of the Church. In Lamin Sanneh's words we have to recover 'a spiritual system of explanation' for a civilization that while being admired for what it produces and disseminates, is easily caricatured in its beliefs and underlying values. Freedom is an act of faith.

#### Notes

1. Cartoonists who lampooned the Nativity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the Secularist magazine were sentenced to a year's hard labour.

2. Conducted for Channel 4 Dispatches 'Attitudes to Living in Britain - A Survey of Muslim Opinion'. GfK stands for 'Growth from Knowledge'.

3. Chris Harman, 'the Prophet and the Proletariat,' *Marxism Online*, 1994, <http://www.marxisme.dk/arkiv/harman/1994/prophet/ch10.htm>.

#### References

Malik, Kenan 2009 *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affairs and its Legacy* London: Atlantic  
Modood, Tariq and T Berthoud et al 1997 *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage - Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities* London: Policy Studies Institute

## Public truth and public utility

'According to rational-choice theory, state-subsidised European churches are overstuffed with bureaucrats and professionals who live off the establishment, whereas American churches are subjected to the rigours of the marketplace. Thus Europeans view their churches as public utilities rather than, as in America, rival companies.' Richard Neuhaus, 'Secularisations' (ACCESS No. 724). Now there's an interesting starting-point for reflection on the vision of things 'public'..

# Comment

## CRY FREEDOM

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" sang Kris Kristofferson in Me and Bobby McGee. Freedom is a notoriously difficult concept to nail down. But when it is taken away from us, then we know. Perhaps freedom is best defined by its opposites: imprisonment, slavery, oppression, bondage. In Britain we have the great privilege of living in what is broadly a free society. We are free to go where we choose, to say what we think, to meet with those with whom we want to meet. There are many societies on earth where these freedoms are severely curtailed. It is very important that we do

not take these freedoms for granted. Our constitutional democracy is a powerful bulwark against totalitarianism. But freedom in society is always under threat. The history of the twentieth century should make this abundantly clear to anyone with eyes to see.

In this country we are not persecuted for being Christian as many are in other parts of the world. Yet there are a growing number of arenas in our society where to speak openly as a Christian is to invite some form of ridicule or sanction. TIME magazine recently described Britain as "one of the most aggressively secular societies on the planet." We do have a battle on our hands. It is not a battle that will be won by taking the road of least resistance.

Ian Cowley

## Lesslie Newbigin on DVD

With thanks to Dan and Sue Beeby, the Network has recently acquired videotapes of three lectures presented by Lesslie Newbigin in February 1989. Titled *Europe: A Mission Field*, they were delivered at the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rueschlikon, Switzerland. These have been transferred on to two DVD's which can be purchased from the Network for £10 plus £2 postage within Europe ((£4 beyond Europe). Proceeds from sales will be used to support the continuing online presence and further development of [www.Newbigin.net](http://www.Newbigin.net).

From Dan's personal files we have also been able to trace a further dozen texts written by Lesslie Newbigin. These had been recorded but not previously sighted by those of us creating the [Newbigin.net](http://www.Newbigin.net) online searchable database. They are now being scanned for uploading to the site.

Among the texts found was a little essay Newbigin produced in 1982 for the

Mission and other Faiths Committee of the United Reformed Church (of which he was a member). This 'very feeble essay' as Newbigin called it (ACCESS No. 725) is a reminder of the context in which Newbigin first began wrestling in a sustained way with Western culture. The proposal had been made that a booklet be produced on Marxism. Newbigin protested 'If we do a booklet on Marxism, then we must at the same time do one on liberal, free market capitalism; if we do not, we shall be looking at Marxism through our liberal-capitalist spectacles and not through Gospel spectacles'. He was then invited himself to draft the kind of thing he had in mind. 'When I tried to do so, I hardly knew how to start. After much struggle I produced a very feeble essay of a page and a half... but the problem would not go away.' Many will be grateful today that, for him, it wouldn't!