

Vacuous Vacuums

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, OCT 16 2012

The dust may slowly be beginning to settle on the 'Innocence of Muslims' affair, yet it is likely that it will have an enduring legacy. No doubt the episode yields many possible avenues for discussion, but one of the most fascinating aspects of the whole thing, which this post aims to partially venture into, was the digital reaction to events. Whilst the predictable chorus and online frenzy sprung from the more obvious anti-Muslim clique,[1] the incomprehension from certain self-proclaimed secular liberals, sceptics, humanists and atheists is far more interesting.

When news broke of the U.S. Embassy in Libya being besieged, social media accounts, the blogosphere and the general online landscape exploded with slews of pompous gloating from certain atheists about how foolish and deluded Muslims were and how religion bore the responsibility for these attacks; this condescending arrogance can perhaps be best encapsulated in the following remarks:

'Koran discovered with coffee cup stain on the front cover, US marines deployed to all Starbucks franchises.'

'Somebody in New Zealand insulted Thor. Quick, burn the Peruvian embassy and behead the Italian ambassador'

All of this is nothing new of course. It has become a habit of many of the so-called 'militant atheist' crowd to instinctively deride religious people in developing nations[2] and, more significantly, assert religious belief to be the only factor which motivates such people to commit atrocious acts. As far as Muslims are concerned, there has been a vacuum put in place by many so-called militant sceptics in which social, economic, cultural, geographical, psychological, political and historical factors are comfortably put on the shelf when explaining their behaviour.[3] Indeed, a leading light of the so-called 'New Atheist' movement has even gone to describe the analysis of other factors as a 'ruinous self-deception'. Yes, that's right, looking beyond mono-causal explanations is the path to ruin. It is so very, very strange that those who often advocate the application and advancement of scientific principles such as critical thinking, empirical investigation and examining all the possible factors when seeking to understand events jettison those principles so easily and gleefully when it comes to Islam (or religion in general).[4]

On the other hand, though, I suppose it is more challenging and time consuming to read between and beyond the lines of news stories, engage the brain, think critically, conduct further research, and endeavour to understand that the 'Innocence of the Muslims' episode was more than a case of people being whipped up into a ferocious mob over a film. It is more challenging, for example, to convincingly answer the question of why the attacks took place when they did.[5] The trailer for the 'Innocence of Muslims' was released in July, yet suddenly embassies are under siege near to the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by extremists. Was this all a coincidence and spontaneous outburst? Sure, must have been. The U.S. Government had no involvement in the production of the film, so why was its embassy attacked? The predictable response from many of the 'New Atheist' ilk would be to regurgitate lazy rhetoric about Muslims hating U.S. freedoms, and point towards something they read in Huntington's woefully misleading 'clash of civilisations' thesis.

Could U.S. foreign policy and the attitudes towards it in the Middle East have any role in this? Surely not. I suppose it would be tedious to try to understand why the U.S. – through the numerous, violent operations carried out in the Middle East in order to ensure their continued hegemony over their 'areas of interest'; and their propping up of opportunistic, repressive religious-political leaders – has taken on truly mythical status of dislike in the region. It is

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even more challenging to consider that this perception of the U.S. allows entrepreneurial political and religious leaders to mobilize underemployed, disadvantaged and often discontented young men to lash out at a foreign power rather than focus their energies on the dissatisfying way in which their own leaders govern. Also, imagine all the reading you would have to do on the empirical research which would explain how ideological constructs, religion being just one on a long list, can act as vessels for violence rather than 'root causes'. This would be too large a stepping stone to jump to from the flimsy axiom of "it's all down to religion". Besides, broad brush strokes achieve a finished picture far quicker than delicate reasoning, and shades of grey somehow seem so much duller than black and white.

No, a single, simple explanation – religion – is all that is needed because to such pundits Muslims are, well, simple people. To say that there are remnants of colonial attitudes present here would be an understatement.

Still, seeing as the rules have been established when examining this sort of phenomenon, let's apply the method to examine another case.

Between August 6 and 10 2011, London and many towns across England suffered widespread rioting, looting and arson where thousands took to the streets. The first night of rioting took place on August 7 2011, which saw several violent clashes with police, and the subsequent destruction of police vehicles, a magistrates' court, a double-decker bus, many civilian homes and businesses. Overnight, looting took place in Tottenham Hale Retail Park and nearby Wood Green. On August 8, Croydon's House of Reeves Furniture Store, a 150-year-old building which had been a family business for generations, was set ablaze and quickly reduced to ashes and rubble as a consequence.

The following days saw similar scenes in other parts of London with the worst violence taking place in Hackney, Brixton, Chingford, Peckham, Enfield, Battersea, Croydon, Ealing East Ham, and Oxford Circus. Similar scenes were seen across the country as, from August 8 to 10, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, and Manchester, along with several towns, experienced 'copy-cat' violence.

The riots were characterised by unprecedented levels of rampant looting and arson. So appalling was the scale of the rioting that British Prime Minister David Cameron and other government and opposition leaders ended their holidays to attend to the matter, and Parliament was recalled on 11 August to debate the desperate situation. All police leave was cancelled and in London the police presence was tripled in an attempt to quell the rioting. Overall, the English riots left five dead and 16 injured. An estimated £200 million worth of property damage was incurred, and local economic activity was significantly compromised.

Making sense of such raging insanity is fairly simple. I am resoundingly confident that we can safely dismiss all other possible causal explanations for and factors determining these events. I am also adamant that contextualising these riots within some form of political and historical climate would be a pointless enterprise. Instead, the only conclusion we can draw from all this is that the vast majority of the English are barbaric and uncivilized savages who will riot at any moment. Moreover, the moderate, peaceful English people proved themselves to be abject cowards in their general failure to confront the rioters, and their cowardice also makes them in some ways responsible for the riots. Only Turkish and Kurdish – which are largely Muslim communities – shop owners along Wood Green, Turnpike Lane and Green Lanes, who formed local 'protection units' around their shops and the defiant Sikhs who took to the streets to protect the homes, businesses and places of worship in Southall, West London can hold their heads high. The same can be said of the Bangladeshi, Kurdish, Pakistani and Turkish communities who chased down masked youths in several areas of North and East London. But these people with the courage to stand up to extremism remain in the minority. We must dice through the shackles of political correctness and confront the truth that England, as a whole, is a thoroughly backward nation morally.

Now, exempting the most hardened Anglophobe, the level of analysis presented above would be pounced upon from every angle; it would be dissected, critically ripped asunder and dismissed as analytically over simplistic, patronising and unfair in its message and tone. Throngs of impassioned defences would emerge of the English people and how it is essentially racist to insult a whole nation of people based on the violent actions of a minority.

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So, then, why is this lazy line of thinking harnessed so readily when it comes to discussing the behaviour of certain Muslims?

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Al McKay is a Deputy Editor at e-IR.

[1] For some examples see

<http://frontpagemag.com/2012/mark-tapson/barbarians-at-the-gate/>

<http://www.jihadwatch.org/2012/09/protesting-the-documentary-innocence-of-muslims-when-you-lack-arguments-use-violence.html>

<http://frontpagemag.com/2012/dgreenfield/more-mo-movies-are-coming-to-rioting-motowners/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCXHPKhRCVg>

[2] The worst offender in this respect is Sam Harris. Harris proclaims that “It is time for us to admit that not all cultures are at the same stage of moral development.” (The End of Faith, p.143-4). Due to the developing world’s moral inferiority, Harris feels these people are unfit to be trusted with self-determination. Instead, he thinks only Western imposed dictators can lead such people to Enlightenment:

“It appears that one of the most urgent tasks we now face in the developed world is to find some way of facilitating the emergence of civil societies everywhere else. Whether such societies have to be democratic is not at all clear. Zakaria has persuasively argued that the transition from tyranny to liberalism is unlikely to be accomplished by plebiscite. It seems all but certain that some form of benign dictatorship will generally be necessary to bridge the gap. But benignity is the key and if it cannot emerge from within a state, it must be imposed from without. The means of such imposition are necessarily crude: they amount to economic isolation, military intervention (whether open or covert), or some combination of both.” (The End of Faith, p. 151)

[3] Three recent best-seller texts that best exemplify this trend are Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006); and Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007). In fairness to Dawkins and Hitchens, they have displayed a capacity to look beyond the religious explanation and look at other factors; this cannot be said for Harris.

[4] A critique by Scott Atran on the unscientific way in which New Atheists analyse religion can be found here.

[5] An analysis of the reaction to the Danish Cartoons in 2005 can be read in ‘Blasphemy and

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Violence' RE Hassner – International Studies Quarterly, 2011 – Wiley Online Library

Available online at

http://www.waronsacredgrounds.com/uploads/Blasphemy_and_Violence.pdf

About the author:

Alasdair McKay is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth. He has edited several books for E-International Relations, including *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).