



Kenan Malik

How to become a real Muslim

A media reliant on scandal has colluded with self-promoting but marginal Muslim clerics to create a cycle of self-reinforcing myths around the Mohammed cartoons, writes Kenan Malik. The fear of causing offence has helped undermine progressive trends in Islam and strengthened the hand of religious bigots.

In Ireland seven people are arrested over an alleged plot to kill Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks, who had depicted the Prophet Mohammad with the body of a dog in the newspaper *Nerikes Allehanda*. In Aarhus, a Somalian axeman tries to hack down Kurt Westergaard, the most controversial of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoonists. In London, Faisal Yamani, a Saudi lawyer, threatens to use Britain's notorious libel laws to sue ten Danish newspapers that published the cartoons in the name of all 95 000 "descendants of Mohammed".

Five years after *Jyllands-Posten* published its now-notorious caricatures, the reverberations are still being felt. And not just by the cartoonists. The threats and violence that continue to surround their publication have had a chilling impact upon writers, publishers, gallery owners and theatre directors. Two years ago, the American publishing giant Random House dropped *The Jewel of Medina*, a breezy, romantic tale about Aisha, the Prophet Mohammad's youngest wife, after fears that it might prove offensive. When, last year, Yale University Press published *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, Jytte Klausen's scholarly study of the cartoon controversy, it refused, much to her disgust, to include any of the cartoons. When the free speech magazine *Index on Censorship*, published an [interview](#) with Klausen about Yale's decision, it too refused to show any of the cartoons.

"You would think twice, if you were honest," said Ramin Gray, the Associate Director at London's Royal Court Theatre when asked he would put on a play critical of Islam. "You'd have to take the play on its individual merits, but given the time we're in, it's very hard, because you'd worry that if you cause offence then the whole enterprise would become buried in a sea of controversy. It does make you tread carefully." In June 2007, the theatre cancelled a new adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, set in Muslim heaven, for fear of causing offence. Another London theatre, the Barbican, carved chunks out of its production of *Tamburlaine the Great* for the same reason, while Berlin's Deutsche Oper cancelled a production of Mozart's *Idomeneo* in 2006 because of its depiction of Mohammed. Three years ago, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague removed an exhibition of photos by the Iranian artist Sooreh Hera that depicted gay men wearing masks of Muhammed. "Certain people in our society might perceive it as offensive", said Museum director Wim van Krimpen. *De Volkskrant*, a leftwing Dutch newspaper, praised the museum for its "great professionalism" in excising the images. Hera herself received death

threats. Tim Marlow of London's White Cube art gallery suggested that such self-censorship by artists and museums was now common, though "very few people have explicitly admitted" it.

For many, all this suggests a fundamental conflict between the values of Islam and those of the West. The American writer Christopher Caldwell in his controversial book *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, published last year, argues that Muslim migration to Europe has been akin to a form of colonization. "Since its arrival half a century ago", Caldwell observes, "Islam has broken — or required adjustments to, or rearguard defences of — a good many of the European customs, received ideas and state structures with which it has come in contact." Islam "is not enhancing or validating European culture; it is supplanting it."

This idea of a "clash of civilizations" was first mooted twenty years ago in the wake of the Salman Rushdie affair by the historian Bernard Lewis and popularized a few years later by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington. Today, it has become almost common sense. "All over again", as the novelist Martin Amis has put it, "the West confronts an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ideocratic system which is essentially and unappeasably opposed to its existence."

Yet, even as he goes along with the clash of civilizations thesis, Caldwell reveals its inadequacies. "What secular Europeans call 'Islam'", he points out, "is a set of values that Dante and Erasmus would recognize as theirs". On the other hand, the modern, secular rights that now constitute "core European values" would "leave Dante and Erasmus bewildered."

In other words, what we now regard as "western values" — individual rights, secularism, freedom of speech — are modern values, distinct from those that animated European societies in the past. And it's not just medieval Europeans who would reject contemporary European values. Many contemporary Europeans do too. The British writer Melanie Phillips is militantly hostile to what she sees as the "Islamic takeover of the West" and what she calls "the drift towards social suicide" that comes with accepting Muslim immigration. Yet she is deeply sympathetic to the Islamist rejection of secular humanism, which she thinks has created "a debauched and disorderly culture of instant gratification, with disintegrating families, feral children and violence, squalor and vulgarity on the streets." Muslims "have concluded that the society that expects them to identify with it is a moral cesspit", Phillips argues. "Is it any wonder, therefore, that they reject it?" Caldwell, too, thinks that while the West's current encounter with Islam may be "painful and violent", it has also been, "an infusion of oxygen into the drab, nitpicking, materialist intellectual life of the West", for which we need to express our "gratitude".

There is, in other words, no single set of European values that transcends history in opposition to Islamic values. Nor indeed is there a single set of western values today. The very values against which radical Islamists rail — the values of secular humanism — are the very values that so disgust some of Islam's greatest critics.

If there is no such thing as a set of "European values" that transcend time, the same is true of "Islamic values". Islam, like all religions, comprises both a set of beliefs and a complex of social institutions, traditions and cultures that bind people in a special relationship to a particular conception of the sacred. Over the centuries, those institutions and cultures have transformed the reading of

the *Qur'an* and the practice of Islam. Religions, like all social forms, cannot stand still. Islam today can no more be like the Islam of the seventh century than Mecca today can look like the city of Mohammed's time.

Islam has been transformed not just through time but across space too. The spread of the faith from the Atlantic Coast to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond incorporated peoples who fitted into Qur'anic scripture many of their old religious and social practices. What Pakistani Mirpuris see as traditional Islam is very different from that of North African Bedouins. And what British Mirpuris see as traditional is different from the traditions of Mirpuris still in Mirpur. "The key question", the French sociologist Olivier Roy points out, "is not what the Koran actually says, but what Muslims say the *Qur'an* says." Muslims continually disagree on what the *Qur'an* says, he adds dryly, "while all stressing that the Koran is unambiguous and clear-cut."

Even a tradition as seemingly deeply set and unyielding as the one at the heart of the controversy over the Danish cartoons — the prohibition on the pictorial representation of the Prophet Mohammed — is in truth neither deeply set nor unyielding. Far from Islam having always forbidden representations of the Prophet, it was common to portray him until comparatively recently. The prohibition against such depictions only emerged in the 17th century. Even over the past 400 years, a number of Islamic, especially Shiite, traditions have accepted the pictorial representation of Muhammed. The Edinburgh University Library in Scotland, the Bibliotheque National in Paris, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, all contain dozens of Persian, Ottoman and Afghan manuscripts depicting the Prophet. His face can be seen in many mosques too — even in Iran. A seventeenth-century mural on the Iman Zahdah Chah Zaid Mosque in the Iranian town of Isfahan, for instance, shows a Mohammed whose facial features are clearly visible.

Even today, few Muslims have a problem in seeing the Prophet's face. Shortly after *Jyllands Posten* published the cartoons, the Egyptian newspaper *Al Fagr* reprinted them. They were accompanied by a critical commentary, but *Al Fagr* did not think it necessary to blank out Mohammad's face, and faced no opprobrium for not doing so. Egypt's religious and political authorities, even as they were demanding an apology from the Danish Prime Minister, raised no objections to *Al Fagr's* full frontal photos.

So, if there is no universal prohibition to the depiction of Mohammad, why were Muslims universally appalled by the caricatures? They weren't. And those that were, were driven by political zeal rather than theological fervour.

The publications of the cartoons in September 2005 caused no immediate reaction, even in Denmark. Only when journalists, disappointed by the lack of controversy, contacted a number of imams for their response, did Islamists begin to recognize the opportunity provided not just by the caricatures themselves but also by the sensitivity of Danish society to their publication.

Among the first contacted was the controversial cleric Ahmed Abu Laban, infamous for his support for Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks. He seized upon the cartoons to transform himself into a spokesman for Denmark's Muslims. Yet however hard he pushed, he initially found it difficult to provoke major outrage in Denmark or abroad. It took more than four months of often hysterical campaigning, and considerable arm-twisting by Saudi diplomats, to create a major controversy. At the end of January 2006, Saudi Arabia recalled

its ambassador from Denmark and launched a consumer boycott of Danish goods. In response a swathe of European newspapers republished the cartoons in "solidarity" with *Jyllands-Posten*.

It was only now that the issue became more than a minor diplomatic kerfuffle. There were demonstrations and riots in India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Palestine, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Danish embassies in Damascus, Beirut and Teheran were torched. But, as Jytte Klausen has observed, these protests "were not caused by the cartoons, but were part of conflicts in pre-existing hot spots" such as northern Nigeria, where there exists an effective civil war between Muslim salafists and Christians. The violence surrounding the cartoon conflict, Klausen suggests, has been "misreported" as expressions of spontaneous violence from Muslims "confronted with bad pictures". That, she insists, "is absolutely not the case". Rather "these images have been exploited by political groups in the pre-existing conflict over Islam."

Why did journalists contact Abu Laban in the first place? The Danish press described him as a "spiritual leader". He was in fact a mechanical engineer by trade, and an Islamist by inclination. His Islamic Society of Denmark was closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood but had little support among Danish Muslims. Out of a population of 180 000 Danish Muslims, fewer than a thousand attended the Society's Friday prayers.

Abu Laban was, however, infamous for supporting the attack on the Twin Towers. From a journalistic viewpoint, it made sense to get a quote from someone so controversial. But politically, too, it made sense. For western liberals have come to see figures like Abu Laban as the true, authentic voice of Islam. The Danish MP Naser Khader tells of a conversation with Tøger Seidenfaden, editor of *Politiken*, a leftwing newspaper highly critical of the caricatures. "He said to me that the cartoons insulted all Muslims", Khader recalls. "I said I was not insulted. He said, 'But you're not a real Muslim'."

In liberal eyes, in other words, to be a real Muslim is to find the cartoons offensive. Once Muslim authenticity is so defined, then only a figure such as Abu Laban can be seen as a true Muslim voice. The Danish cartoons, as Jytte Klausen observed, "have become not just a tool for extremism but also created a soap opera in the West about what Muslims 'do' with respect to pictures". Or, as Naser Khader has put it, "What I find really offensive is that journalists and politicians see the fundamentalists as the real Muslims." The myths about the Danish cartoons — that all Muslims hated the cartoons and that it was a theological conflict — helped turn Abu Laban into an authentic voice of Islam. At the same time, Abu Laban's views seemed to confirm the myths about the Danish cartoons.

The template for this kind of mythmaking was the Salman Rushdie affair. More than twenty years on from the fatwa, we have come to accept almost as self-evident the idea that the worldwide controversy was sparked by the blasphemies in *The Satanic Verses*, which all Muslims found deeply offensive. It is not true.

The Satanic Verses was published in September 1988. For the next five months, until the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his fatwa on Valentine's Day 1989, most Muslims ignored the book. The campaign against the novel was largely confined to the Indian subcontinent and to Britain. Aside from the involvement of Saudi Arabia, there was little enthusiasm for a campaign in the

Arab world or in Turkey, or among Muslim communities in France or Germany. When the Saudi authorities tried at the end of 1988 to get the novel banned in Muslim countries worldwide, few responded except those with large subcontinental populations, such as South Africa or Malaysia. Even in Iran the book was openly available and was reviewed in many newspapers.

As in the controversy over the Danish cartoons, it was politics, not religion, that transformed *The Satanic Verses* into a worldwide event of historic proportions. The novel first became an issue in India because the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist group against which Rushdie had taken aim in his previous novel *Shame*, tried to use the novel as political leverage in a general election campaign. From India, the anti-Rushdie campaign spilled into Britain, where the Jamaat had a network of organizations, funded by the Saudi government. From the 1970s Saudi Arabia had used oil money to fund Salafi organizations and mosques worldwide to cement its position as spokesman for the *umma*. Then came the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that overthrew the Shah and established an Islamic republic. Tehran became the capital of Muslim radicalism and Ayatollah Khomeini its spiritual leader, posing a direct challenge to Riyadh. The *Satanic Verses* became a weapon in that conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Riyadh had made the initial running. The fatwa was an attempt by Iran to wrestle back the initiative.

The Rushdie affair was a watershed in western political and cultural life. It was through the Rushdie affair that many of the issues that now dominate political debate — multiculturalism, free speech, radical Islam, terrorism — first came to the surface. It was also through the Rushdie affair that our thinking about these issues began to change. The controversy over *The Satanic Verses* was primarily a political, not religious, conflict. But having accepted the myths that the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* was driven by theology and that all Muslims were offended by the novel, many liberals came to the conclusion in the post-Rushdie world both that the Islamists were the true voice of Islam and also that in a plural society social harmony required greater restraints on free speech.

"Self-censorship", the British Muslim philosopher Shabbir Akhtar suggested at the height of the Rushdie affair, "is a meaningful demand in a world of varied and passionately held convictions. What Rushdie publishes about Islam is not just his business. It is everyone's — not least every Muslim's — business."

Increasingly, western liberals have come to agree. Whatever may be right in principle, many now argue, in practice one must appease religious and cultural sensibilities because such sensibilities are so deeply felt. We live in a world, so the argument runs, in which there are deep-seated conflicts between cultures embodying different values, many of which are incommensurate but all of which are valid in their own context. For such diverse societies to function and to be fair, we need to show respect for other peoples, cultures, and viewpoints. Social justice requires not just that individuals are treated as political equals, but also that their cultural beliefs are given equal recognition and respect. This is the philosophy of multiculturalism. And in the multicultural world, the avoidance of cultural pain has come to be regarded as more important than what is often seen as an abstract right to freedom of expression. As the sociologist Tariq Modood has put it, "If people are to occupy the same political space without conflict, they mutually have to limit the extent to which they subject each others' fundamental beliefs to criticism." In the post-Rushdie world, liberals have effectively internalized the fatwa.

The consequence of all this has been that liberals have come to support the most reactionary figures within the Muslim community. Rushdie's critics no more spoke for the Muslim community than Rushdie himself did. Both represented different strands of opinion within Muslim communities, just as Naser Khader and Abu Laban do. Rushdie gave voice to a radical, secular sentiment that in the 1980s was deeply entrenched. Rushdie's critics spoke for some of the most conservative strands. Their campaign against *The Satanic Verses* was not to protect Muslim communities from unconscionable attack from anti-Muslim bigots but to protect their own privileged position within those communities from political attack from radical critics, to assert their right to be the true voice of Islam by denying legitimacy to such critics. And they succeeded at least in part because secular liberals embraced them as the "authentic" voice of the Muslim community.

The United Kingdom Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA), the principal anti-Rushdie campaign in Britain, was comprised largely of organizations inspired by radical Islamism. These groups came to form the core of the Muslim Council of Britain, which was set up in 1977 and quickly became accepted by policy makers and journalists as the voice of British Islam.

"The overwhelming number of organizations that the [British] government talks to", says sociologist Chetan Bhatt, an expert on religious extremism, "are influenced by, dominated by or front organizations of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. Their agenda is strictly based on the politics of the Islamic radical right, it doesn't represent the politics or aspirations of the majority of Muslims in this country."

Indeed it doesn't. Polls have consistently found that only around five per cent think that the MCB represented them. But the official support given to such organizations in the post-Rushdie era has distorted perceptions of Muslims communities in Britain and to a certain degree, Muslim self-perceptions too. And not just in Britain. There has been, Naser Khader suggests, a similar process in Denmark. "Just months before the cartoon controversy, the Prime Minister had invited Abu Laban to a conference on terrorism. People like me kept saying, 'They only represent a few people'. But nobody listened. The government thought if they talked to someone who looked like a Muslim, then they were talking to real Muslims. I don't look like what they think a Muslim should look like — I don't have a beard, I wear a suit, I drink — so I'm not a real Muslim. But the majority of Muslims in Denmark are more like me than they are like Abu Laban."

When I was growing up in the 1980s, the concept of a "radical" in a Muslim context meant someone who was a militant secularist, someone who challenged not just racism but the power of the mosques too. Someone like me. Today, of course, it means almost the opposite — a "radical" is a religious fundamentalist. Why the shift? Largely because of disenchantment with the secular left, on the one hand, and the institutionalization of multicultural policies, on the other. Disenchantment with secular politics, the disintegration of the Left, and the abandonment by the Left of the politics of universalism in favour of ethnic particularism, has helped push many young, secular Asians towards Islamism as an alternative worldview. At the same time, the emergence of multiculturalism, and of identity politics, has helped create more tribal societies and eroded aspirations to a universal set of values.

Within Muslim communities these developments have helped undermine progressive trends and strengthened the hand of religious bigots. Secular Muslims have come to be regarded as betraying their culture, while radical Islam has become not just more acceptable but, to many, more authentic. As the secular tradition has been squeezed out, the only place offering shelter to disaffected youth has been militant Islam.

Liberal multicultural policies have not created radical Islam, but they have helped create a space for it in western societies that previously had not existed. They have also provided a spurious moral legitimacy to Islamist arguments. Every time a politician denounces an "offensive" work, every time a newspaper apologizes for causing offence, every time a journalist tells someone like Naser Khader that he's not a "real" Muslim, they strengthen the moral claims of the Islamists. There will always be extremists who attempt to murder cartoonists or firebomb newspaper offices. There is little we can do about them. What we can do is refuse to create a culture that emboldens such people by accepting their voices as somehow legitimate.

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