

OPINION

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT WITH AYAAN HIRSI ALI

By Mohamad Abdalla

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If there is one thing that I have learnt from the writings of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, it is that profound anxiety and ignorance about Islam and Muslims run deep in her heart and mind.

It is questionable whether Hirsi's opinions are the result of a direct insight into Islam, or are they based merely on that prejudice against Islam that is centuries old - that Islam is inherently violent and intolerant of others.

Critics of Islam frequently quote some of the more ferocious passages of the Qur'an out of context, arguing that these verses could easily inspire and endorse terrorism.

But they ignore the fact that the Jewish and Christian scriptures can be just as aggressive, if taken out of their historical context (just see, for example, Numbers 31:17-18 and Luke 19:26-27).

Many violent Jewish and Christian groups have used these Biblical texts to justify their actions. Crusaders used them against Muslims and Jews. Nazis used them against Jews. Recently Serbian Christians used them against Bosnian Muslims. Zionists are using them regularly against Palestinians. And Muslim extremists have used texts from the Qur'an to support their evil acts of terrorism.

But the truth is that a tiny proportion of Muslim, Jewish and Christian extremists use these texts to justify violence against others.

There is no justification in Islam for violence, extremism or terrorism.

Targeting civilians' life and property through any method of attack is forbidden and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not "martyrs."

Prophet Muhammad spent most of his life trying to stop indiscriminate slaughter. Karen Armstrong states that "an objective investigation of the life of Muhammad would lead to the conclusion that he abhorred the use of violence and 'pursued a daring, inspired policy of non-violence that was worthy of Gandhi."

But even in times of war restraint and care is emphasized in the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an says, "therefore if they withdraw from you but fight you not, and (instead) send you (guarantees of) peace, then God has opened no way for you (to war against them)" (4:89-91).

And elsewhere, "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God does not love transgressors" (2: 190).

Immediately after the inhuman and barbaric attacks of 11 September 2001, our mosque in the quiet suburb of Kuraby in Brisbane was burnt to the ground. The arsonist was not a Muslim. One could claim that he was a Christian and by extension accuse all Christians and Christianity of being violent.

Of course, this is tantamount to a fallacy of generalization, something that Hirsi liberally indulges in throughout her polemics on



ARE AYAAN HIRSI ALI'S OPINIONS THE RESULT OF DIRECT INSIGHT INTO ISLAM, OR ARE THEY BASED MERELY ON CENTURIES-OLD PREJUDICE?

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Islam and Muslims.

Nevertheless, everything was burnt with our mosque, except for one page of a book of Hadith (narrations of Prophet Muhammad), that had the following Hadith: "A strong person is not one who wrestles and defeats others; but a strong person is one who controls one's self in times of anger."

In these times of tension, the Muslim community's calm and compelling demeanour successfully contained and managed reconciliation strategies between the Islamic and Australian communities.

They led a reconciliation strategy to create better understanding between the local Islamic and wider Australian community.

The mosque opened its doors for the wider Australian community to visit and observe how Muslims worship, and engaged in a discussion about Islam.

Many Christian groups and churches responded positively, and interfaith gatherings are ongoing.

The Muslim community of Brisbane went a step further and fully funded the establishment of the Griffith University Islamic Research Unit (GIRU) in 2005 to support a balanced approach to Islam and advocates the method of contextualization and maqasid - or an objective-oriented approach, to the interpretation of Islamic scriptures.

To give just one example, our first graduate, Dr Halim Rane, wrote on the role of non-violence in facilitating a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The examiners of his thesis, who are world renowned experts of non-Muslim heritage in the fields of Islamic Studies, International Relations and Conflict Resolution, state that it is "a first-class dissertation" with "very profound practical implications for the pursuit of peace in the Middle East."

Other research currently undertaken at GIRU concerns ethical investment, democracy in Malaysia, corruption in Indonesia, human rights in Jordan and the development of an appropriate model for dealing with domestic violence in the Australian Muslim community.

There is nothing "hard-line" or "extreme" about these topics!

I suggest that Hirsi would benefit from empirical research before making absurd generalizations about Muslims. I would direct her, and those persuaded by her, to read the work of John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, [Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think](#).

Their findings were the result of a mammoth, multiyear Gallup research project, involving tens of thousands of hour-long, face-to-face interviews with residents of more than thirty-five nations that are predominately Muslim or have substantial Muslim population.

The results of their research were extremely revealing. For instance, they found that most Muslims do not believe that the West is monolithic. They criticize or celebrate countries based on their politics, not on their culture or religion.

They found that most Muslims dream of having a better career, not of fighting in a jihad, and that Muslims and Americans are equally likely to reject attacks on civilians as morally unjustified.

They found that only a minority of Muslims condone acts of terrorism and are no more likely to be religious than the rest of the population.

They found that Muslims around the world most admire the West's technology and its democracy (the same top two responses given by Americans when asked the same question), but that they least admire the West's perceived moral decay and breakdown of traditional values (the same responses given by Americans when asked the same question).

They found that Muslim women want equal rights and religion in their societies, and that most Muslims believe that, in order to improve relations with Muslim societies, the West needs to moderate their views toward Muslims and respect Islam.

Furthermore, a recent poll by WorldPublicOpinion.org shows that 46% of Americans think that "bombing and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians" are "never justified," while 24% believe these attacks are "often or sometimes justified."

Contrast this with data taken the same year from some of the majority Muslim nations, in which 74% in Indonesia, 86% in Pakistan, 81% in Bangladesh and 80% in Iran agree that terrorist attacks are "never justified."

Likewise, 6% of the American public thinks that attacks in which civilians are targets are "completely justified." This figure is 2% in Iran and 4% in Saudi Arabia.

Such figures clearly indicate that terrorism in Muslim lands is as much an "out group" activity as any other violent crime. An abundance of statistical evidence indicates that Muslims are against terrorism.

On the question "Do Muslim Women want to be liberated by the West?" the Gallup data shows that, while Muslim women favour gender equality, they want it on their own terms and within their own cultural context.

BARNEY ZWARTZ, THE AGE

"Julia Gillard has agreed to be interviewed by the Australian Christian Lobby today in an attempt to recover ground with churchgoers."

PETER HITCHENS, MAIL ONLINE

"There is a strong chance that we will soon lose Turkey to the Islamic world, much as we lost Iran to the ayatollahs 30 years ago. And there is not much we can do about it - least of all the daft scheme to include this nation in the EU."

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Scott Stephens



Scott Stephens is the Religion and Ethics editor for ABC Online. Before joining the ABC he taught theology for many years, and even did a stint as a parish minister with the Uniting Church in Australia. He has written extensively on the intersections among philosophy, theology, ethics and politics, as well as on modern atheism's dependence on the Christian legacy.

He is a regular contributor to *The Drum*, *Eureka Street* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. He has edited and translated (with Rex Butler) two volumes of the *Selected Works* of the highly influential philosopher and cultural critic, Slavoj Zizek - including *The Universal Exception*, which was named by The Guardian newspaper one of its "Books of the Year" in 2007.

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While admiring Western women's legal status, very few Muslim women consider adopting Western values to help their progress within Muslim countries.

They do not see, for example, that tearing off their hijab is liberation from their "backward ways" in favour of the "enlightened" ways of Europe.

Asifa Quraishi, Professor of Law at the University of Wisconsin and an advocate for women's rights, states that "The most effective way to oppose hurtful practices done against women in the name of Sharia is to challenge the compliance of these laws to Islamic principles, instead of arguing for the removal of Sharia."

Using this method women's rights advocates in Pakistan, for example, were able to bring amendments to the discriminatory 1979 rape laws. In November 2006, these laws were amended and replaced with the passage of the Women's Protection Bill.

In 2000, a German man, Ruediger Nehberg, opposed the female genital mutilation practiced in some Muslim countries by arguing that this practice violates Islamic principles, and does not stem from Islam. In December 2006, a conference of prominent Muslim theologians agreed that the practice of female genital mutilation is irreconcilable with Islam.

Using Sharia arguments to oppose unjust practices is not new in Islam. In early Islam women challenged the highest political and religious authorities using arguments from the Qur'an.

For example, when Omar ibn al-Khattab, Sunni Islam's second caliph, proposed a cap on the amount women could stipulate for their dowry, a woman objected publicly and obliged Omar to change his view based on her Qur'anic evidence.

If Hirsi is genuinely concerned for the well-being of Muslims, then I would suggest that a better way forward is proposed by Esposito and Mogahed.

They write, "Show consistency of concern - concern for women's rights or other rights should be consistent with the greater context of human rights, including harm caused by poverty, political repression, and war - especially when Western policies are perceived to have caused these hardships."

They further propose that it is crucial to move beyond the progressive versus fundamentalism dichotomy, which stems from a basic misconception about Islam and Islamic law.

They criticize Islam's Western detractors of often having an "innate, often subconscious sense of superiority" and thus tend to approach issues facing Muslim people with a "rescue mentality." These detractors, among whom I would include Hirsi, "must question the assumption that religious teachings are the root cause of societal problems."

Finally, they argue that critics like Hirsi need to "decouple" libertinism from liberation, because "conflating libertinism with liberation only empowers critics and weakens those who wish to make positive change from within."

Mohamad Abdalla is the Founding Director of the Griffith Islamic Research Unit, Brisbane, and Director of the Queensland node of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies.

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A lot of excuse-making there. The fact is that millions of women suffer brutal oppression that is justified by Islamic religious leaders that claim the authority of God. We're lucky to have people such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali who subject these practices to the uncompromising criticism they deserve.

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