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Latest fiasco in World of Islam West relations

People are dying again, unnecessarily. First of all, in California, a member of the Coptic (Egyptian Christian) diaspora, Nakoula Bassely Nakoula, produces a 14-minute trailer for a film entitled 'The Innocence of Muslims', which after suggesting in its opening sequence that Christians in Egypt are not being properly protected by the authorities against attacks by radical Muslims, goes on to portray Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, as stupid and, more significantly, of highly dubious character with respect to his sexual ethics, regarding women, men, and children. The Coptic bishop of Los Angeles condemns the film, saying that Copts respect people of other faiths, but the film is picked up and publicised by Steve Klein, a right-wing evangelical Christian with a long history of stoking anti-Islamic sentiment, and Pastor Terry Jones, the Florida Pentecostal pastor who shot to notoriety for threatening to burn a copy of the Qur'an on the 10th anniversary of 11th September 2001. Nakoula uses a pseudonym on the internet, Sam Bacile. Perhaps the true quality of his actions could best be made clear by removing the 's' at the start of the pseudonym and then changing one or two vowels so that it becomes 'imbecile'. Everyone must know by now, surely, that Muslims do not like their prophet being insulted. Many diaspora communities, however, contain extremists whose views and actions are unhelpful to the communities they claim to represent back in their original homelands, with other examples being Armenians in France or California, and Sikhs in Canada.

Having attracted very little attention in California when it was first produced, the film begins to draw much greater interest when it is translated into Arabic and extracts of it are shown on several Egyptian satellite television channels on Saturday 8th September. Calls to protest outside the US embassy in Cairo follow, and here we see the irresponsibility of some religious leaders, who, surely, must know by now the potential consequences, in terms of violence and deaths, of stirring up hatred in this way. In particular the lack of critical analysis of the film, and of any awareness that it was produced by a tiny group of extremist American Christians who are in no sense representative of either the mainstream Christian community or of the vast majority of Americans, is highly damaging. Some Christian and Muslim religious leaders, having seen the destructive consequences of stirring up religious hatred, have abjured such action, for example Pastor James Wuye and Imam Mohammad Ashafa in Nigeria, who having at one stage led religious militias against each other have now renounced violence and work together to promote inter-religious understanding and prevent inter-religious conflict. Too many religious leaders in the Middle East have not made this transition, however, and in turn perpetuate desperate caricatures of the West and of Christianity. Peaceful demonstrations, including the one organised with several thousand participants by Hizballah in Lebanon, are hugely effective and powerful, but the pronouncements of some religious leaders do not have this kind of result.

Once the calls to protest have been proclaimed, however, momentum quickly builds and it is not long before violence breaks out. Some of this may be a result of genuine, if misguided, religious conviction and zeal, but there is no shortage of hangers-on waiting for any excuse to become involved in rioting and violence, from well-organised gangs of football supporters such as the Ultras in Egypt through to others who become involved rather unthinkingly. These may include otherwise respectable citizens letting their hair down, as memorably portrayed in Hanif Qureshi's novel 'The Buddha of Suburbia', through to innocent or naïve students. We have seen examples of this in the United Kingdom too over the past couple of years, such as the case of Edward Woollard, the 6th form college student jailed for throwing a fire extinguisher from the roof of Conservative Party headquarters during protests against student fees in London in November 2010, and Laura Johnson, the University of Exeter student jailed for her participation in the London riots of August 2011. Possibly the most dramatic consequence of the anger against the film in the Muslim World is the murder of the American ambassador in Libya, Chris Stevens, and three colleagues, though there is some evidence that the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi had been prepared by a radical Islamist group, Ansar al-Shari'a, even before the furore over the film broke out, to coincide with the eleventh anniversary of 9/11.

The final villain of the piece is the extreme interpretation in the West of the right of free speech, which if interpreted in an absolutely unbridled way can, as these recent events have shown, result in people dying. The First Amendment to the US Constitution, which, among other things, prohibits the abridgement of freedom of speech, has resulted in many unexpected, and probably unhelpful, consequences. Why are so many Jihadist websites, calling for and glorifying the use of violence, including against the United States, hosted in that country? The First Amendment is usually given as the justification for this, since freedom of speech is seen as sacrosanct, and thus cannot be limited. It has perhaps become a shibboleth, however, as speech may sometimes be legitimately restricted, with 'Mein Kampf', for example, being prohibited from publication in the Netherlands and hate speech sometimes being invoked even in the United States, for example against the Klu Klux Klan. In this case, however, no case has yet been launched against the film, so that we have seen the extraordinary spectacle of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US military, General Martin E Dempsey, the head of the most powerful military machine which the world has ever seen, reduced to telephoning Pastor Terry Jones to ask if he might consider withdrawing his support for the film. What are governments for if not to make laws, and what are courts for if not to interpret laws wisely and thus save lives?

The production of the film in California, the reaction from some Muslim religious leaders in the Middle East, the resulting violence across the Muslim World, and the 'do-nothing' interpretation of the First Amendment and the right of free speech, are thus all in different ways acts of folly, so it is very hard to see a way forward.

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