

Letter to a Young Muslim

Monday 31 October 2005, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 2003).

Dear friend,

Remember when you approached me after the big antiwar meeting in November 2001 (I think it was Glasgow) and asked whether I was a believer? I have not forgotten the shock you registered when I replied 'no', or the comment of your friend ('our parents warned us against you'), or the angry questions which the pair of you then began to hurl at me like darts. All of that made me think, and this is my reply for you and all the others like you who asked similar questions elsewhere in Europe and North America.

When we spoke, I told you that my criticism of religion and those who use it for political ends was not a case of being diplomatic in public. Exploiters and manipulators have always used religion self-righteously to further their own selfish ends. It's true that this is not the whole story. There are, of course, deeply sincere people of religion in different parts of the world who genuinely fight on the side of the poor, but they are usually in conflict with organised religion themselves.

The Catholic Church victimised worker or peasant priests who organised against oppression. The Iranian ayatollahs dealt severely with Muslims who preached in favour of a social radicalism. If I genuinely believed that this radical Islam was the way forward for humanity, I would not hesitate to say so in public, whatever the consequences. I know that many of your friends love chanting the name 'Osama' and I know that they cheered on September 11, 2001. They were not alone. It happened all over the world, but had nothing to do with religion. I know of Argentine students who walked out when a teacher criticised Osama. I know a Russian teenager who emailed a one-word message-'Congratulations'-to his Russian friends whose parents had settled outside New York, and they replied: 'Thanks. It was great.' We talked, I remember, of the Greek crowds at football matches who refused to mourn for the two minutes the government had imposed and instead broke the silence with anti-American chants.

But none of this justifies what took place. What lies behind the vicarious pleasure is not a feeling of strength, but a terrible weakness. The people of Indo-China suffered more than any Muslim country at the hands of the US government. They were bombed for 15 whole years and lost millions of their people. Did they even think of bombing America? Nor did the Cubans or the Chileans or the Brazilians. The last two fought against the US-imposed military regimes at home and finally triumphed.

Today, people feel powerless. And so when America is hit they celebrate. They don't ask what such an act will achieve, what its consequences will be and who will benefit. Their response, like the event itself, is purely symbolic.

I think that Osama and his group have reached a political dead-end. It was a grand spectacle, but nothing more. The US, in responding with a war, has enhanced the importance of the action, but I doubt if even that will rescue it from obscurity in the future. It will be a footnote in the history of this century. In political, economic or military terms it was barely a pinprick.

What do the Islamists offer? A route to a past which, mercifully for the people of the seventh

century, never existed. If the 'Emirate of Afghanistan' is the model for what they want to impose on the world then the bulk of Muslims would rise up in arms against them. Don't imagine that either Osama or Mullah Omar represent the future of Islam. It would be a major disaster for the culture we both share if that turned out to be the case. Would you want to live under those conditions? Would you tolerate your sister, your mother or the woman you love being hidden from public view and only allowed out shrouded like a corpse?

I want to be honest with you. I opposed this latest Afghan war. I do not accept the right of big powers to change governments as and when it affects their interests. But I did not shed any tears for the Taliban as they shaved their beards and ran back home. This does not mean that those who have been captured should be treated like animals or denied their elementary rights according to the Geneva convention, but as I've argued elsewhere, the fundamentalism of the American Empire has no equal today. They can disregard all conventions and laws at will. The reason they are openly mistreating prisoners they captured after waging an illegal war in Afghanistan is to assert their power before the world-hence they humiliate Cuba by doing their dirty work on its soil-and warn others who attempt to twist the lion's tail that the punishment will be severe.

I remember how, during the cold war, the CIA and its indigenous recruits tortured political prisoners and raped them in many parts of Latin America. During the Vietnam war the US violated most of the Geneva conventions. They tortured and executed prisoners, raped women, threw prisoners out of helicopters to die on the ground or drown in the sea, and all this, of course, in the name of freedom.

Because many people in the west believe the nonsense about 'humanitarian interventions', they are shocked by these acts, but this is relatively mild compared with the crimes committed in the last century by the Empire. I've met many of our people in different parts of the world since September 11. One question is always repeated: 'Do you think we Muslims are clever enough to have done this?' I always answer 'Yes'. Then I ask who they think is responsible, and the answer is invariably 'Israel'. Why? 'To discredit us and make the Americans attack our countries.' I gently expose their wishful illusions, but the conversation saddens me. Why are so many Muslims sunk in this torpor? Why do they wallow in so much self-pity? Why is their sky always overcast? Why is it always someone else who is to blame?

Sometimes when we talk I get the impression that there is not a single Muslim country of which they can feel really proud. Those who have migrated from South Asia are much better treated in Britain than in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States. It is here that something has to happen. The Arab world is desperate for a change. Over the years, in every discussion with Iraqis, Syrians, Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians and Palestinians, the same questions are raised, the same problems recur. We are suffocating. Why can't we breathe? Everything seems static: our economy, our politics, our intellectuals and, most of all, our religion.

Palestine suffers every day. The west does nothing. Our governments are dead. Our politicians are corrupt. Our people are ignored. Is it surprising that some are responsive to the Islamists? Who else offers anything these days? The US? It doesn't even want democracy, not even in little Qatar, and for a very simple reason. If we elected our own governments they might demand that the US close down its bases. Would it? They already resent al-Jazeera television because it has different priorities from them. It was fine when al-Jazeera attacked corruption within the Arab elite. Thomas Friedman even devoted a whole column to praise of al-Jazeera in the New York Times. He saw it as a sign of democracy coming to the Arab world. No longer. Because democracy means the right to think differently, and al-Jazeera showed pictures of the Afghan war that were not shown on the US networks, so Bush and Blair put pressure on Qatar to stop unfriendly broadcasts.

For the west, democracy means believing in exactly the same things that they believe. Is that really

democracy? If we elected our own government, in one or two countries people might elect Islamists. Would the west leave us alone? Did the French government leave the Algerian military alone? No. They insisted that the elections of 1990 and 1991 be declared null and void. French intellectuals described the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) as 'Islamofascists', ignoring the fact that they had won an election. Had they been allowed to become the government, divisions already present within them would have come to the surface. The army could have warned that any attempt to tamper with the rights guaranteed to citizens under the constitution would not be tolerated. It was only when the original leaders of the FIS had been eliminated that the more lumpen elements came to the fore and created mayhem. Should we blame them for the civil war, or those in Algiers and Paris who robbed them of their victory? The massacres in Algeria are horrendous. Is it only the Islamists who are responsible? What happened in Bentalha, 10 miles south of Algiers, on the night of September 22, 1997? Who slaughtered the 500 men, women and children of that township? Who? The Frenchman who knows everything, Bernard-Henri Lévy, is sure it was the Islamists who perpetrated this dreadful deed. Then why did the army deny the local population arms to defend itself? Why did it tell the local militia to go away that night? Why did the security forces not intervene when they could see what was going on? Why does M Lévy believe that the Maghreb has to be subordinated to the needs of the French republic, and why does nobody attack this sort of fundamentalism?

We know what we have to do, say the Arabs, but every time the west intervenes it sets our cause back many years. So if they want to help, they should stay out. That's what my Arab friends say, and I agree with this approach. Look at Iran. The western gaze turned benevolent during the assault on Afghanistan. Iran was needed for the war, but let the west watch from afar. The imperial fundamentalists are talking about the 'axis of evil', which includes Iran. An intervention there would be fatal. A new generation has experienced clerical oppression. It has known nothing else. Stories about the shah are part of its prehistory. These young men and women are sure about one thing if nothing else. They don't want the ayatollahs to rule them any more. Even though Iran, in recent years, has not been as bad as Saudi Arabia or the late 'Emirate of Afghanistan', it has not been good for the people.

Let me tell you a story. A couple of years ago I met a young Iranian film-maker in Los Angeles. His name was Moslem Mansouri. He had managed to escape with several hours of filmed interviews for a documentary he was making. He had won the confidence of three Tehran prostitutes and filmed them for more than two years. He showed me some of the footage. They talked to him quite openly. They described how the best pick-ups were at religious festivals. I got a flavour of the film from the transcripts he sent me. One of the women tells him: 'Today everyone is forced to sell their bodies! Women like us have to tolerate a man for 10,000 toomans. Young people need to be in a bed together, even for 10 minutes . . . It is a primary need . . . it calms them down.'

'When the government does not allow it, then prostitution grows. We don't even need to talk about prostitution, the government has taken away the right to speak with the opposite sex freely in public . . . In the parks, in the cinemas, or in the streets, you can't talk to the person sitting next to you. On the streets, if you talk to a man, the "Islamic guard" interrogates you endlessly. Today in our country, nobody is satisfied! Nobody has security. I went to a company to get a job. The manager of the company, a bearded guy, looked at my face and said, "I will hire you and I'll give you 10,000 toomans more than the pay rate." I said, "You can at least test my computer skills to see if I'm proficient or not . . ." He said, "I hire you for your looks!" I knew that if I had to work there, I had to have sex with him at least once a day.'

'Wherever you go it's like this! I went to a special family court-for divorce-and begged the judge, a clergyman, to give me my child's custody. I told him, "Please . . . I beg you to give me the custody of my child. I'll be your Kaniz . . ." ['Kaniz' means servant. This is a Persian expression which basically means 'I beg you, I am very desperate'.] What do you think the guy said? He said, "I don't need a

servant! I need a woman!" What do you expect of others when the clergyman, the head of the court, says this? I went to the officer to get my divorce signed, instead he said I should not get divorced and instead get married again without divorce, illegally. Because he said without a husband it will be hard to find a job. He was right, but I didn't have money to pay him . . . These things make you age faster . . . you get depressed . . . you have a lot of stress and it damages you. Perhaps there is a means to get out of this . . . '

Moslem was distraught because none of the American networks wanted to buy the film. They didn't want to destabilise Khatami's regime! Moslem himself is a child of the Revolution. Without it he would never have become a film-maker. He comes from a very poor family. His father is a muezzin and his upbringing was ultra-religious. Now he hates religion. He refused to fight in the war against Iraq. He was arrested. This experience transformed him. 'The prison was a hard but good experience for me. It was in the prison that I felt I am reaching a stage of intellectual maturity. I was resisting and I enjoyed my sense of strength. I felt that I saved my life from the corrupted world of clergies and this is a price I was paying for it. I was proud of it. After one year in prison, they told me that I would be released on the condition that I sign papers stating that I will participate in Friday sermons and religious activities. I refused to sign. They kept me in the prison for one more year.'

Afterwards he took a job on a film magazine as a reporter. 'I thought my work in the media would serve as a cover for my own projects, which were to document the hideous crimes of the political regime itself. I knew that I would not be able to make the kind of films I really want to make due to the censorship regulations. Any scenario that I would write would have never got the permission of the Islamic censorship office. I knew that my time and energy would get wasted. So I decided to make eight documentaries secretly. I smuggled the footage out of Iran. Due to financial problems I've only been able to finish editing two of my films. One is Close Up, Long Shot and the other is Shamloo, The Poet Of Liberty.

'The first film is about the life of Hossein Sabzian, who was the main character of Abbas Kiarostami's drama-documentary called Close Up. A few years after Kiarostami's film, I went to visit Sabzian. He loves cinema. His wife and children get frustrated with him and finally leave him. Today, he lives in a village on the outskirts of Tehran and has come to the conclusion that his love for cinema has resulted in nothing but misery. In my film he says, "People like me get destroyed in societies like the one we live in. We can never present ourselves. There are two types of dead: flat and walking. We are the walking dead!"'

We could find stories like this and worse in every Muslim country. There is a big difference between the Muslims of the diaspora-those whose parents migrated to the western lands-and those who still live in the House of Islam. The latter are far more critical because religion is not crucial to their identity. It's taken for granted that they are Muslims. In Europe and North America things are different. Here an official multiculturalism has stressed difference at the expense of all else. Its rise correlates with a decline in radical politics as such.

'Culture' and 'religion' are softer, euphemistic substitutes for socioeconomic inequality-as if diversity, rather than hierarchy, were the central issue in North American or European society today. I have spoken to Muslims from the Maghreb (France), from Anatolia (Germany); from Pakistan and Bangladesh (Britain), from everywhere (United States) and a South Asian sprinkling in Scandinavia. Why is it, I often ask myself, that so many are like you? They have become much more orthodox and rigid than the robust and vigorous peasants of Kashmir and the Punjab, whom I used to know so well.

The British prime minister is a great believer in single-faith schools. The American president ends each speech with 'God Save America'. Osama starts and ends each TV interview by praising Allah.

All three have the right to do so, just as I have the right to remain committed to most of the values of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment attacked religion-Christianity, mainly-for two reasons: that it was a set of ideological delusions, and that it was a system of institutional oppression, with immense powers of persecution and intolerance. Why should we abandon either of these legacies today?

I don't want you to misunderstand me. My aversion to religion is by no means confined to Islam alone. And nor do I ignore the role which religious ideologies have played in the past in order to move the world forward. It was the ideological clashes between two rival interpretations of Christianity-the Protestant Reformation versus the Catholic Counter-Reformation-that led to volcanic explosions in Europe. Here was an example of razor-sharp intellectual debates fuelled by theological passions, leading to a civil war, followed by a revolution.

The 16th-century Dutch revolt against Spanish occupation was triggered off by an assault on sacred images in the name of confessional correctness. The introduction of a new prayer book in Scotland was one of the causes of the 17th-century Puritan Revolution in England, the refusal to tolerate Catholicism sparked off its successor in 1688. The intellectual ferment did not cease and a century later the ideas of the Enlightenment stoked the furnaces of revolutionary France. The Church of England and the Vatican now combined to contest the new threat, but ideas of popular sovereignty and republics were too strong to be easily obliterated.

I can almost hear your question. What has all this got to do with us? A great deal, my friend. Western Europe had been fired by theological passions, but these were now being transcended. Modernity was on the horizon. This was a dynamic that the culture and economy of the Ottoman Empire could never mimic. The Sunni-Shia divide had come too soon and congealed into rival dogmas. Dissent had, by this time, been virtually wiped out in Islam. The Sultan, flanked by his religious scholars, ruled a state-Empire that was going to wither away and die.

If this was already the case in the 18th century, how much truer it is today. Perhaps the only way in which Muslims will discover this is through their own experiences, as in Iran. The rise of religion is partially explained by the lack of any other alternative to the universal regime of neoliberalism. Here you will discover that as long as Islamist governments open their countries to global penetration, they will be permitted to do what they want in the sociopolitical realm.

The American Empire used Islam before and it can do so again. Here lies the challenge. We are in desperate need of an Islamic Reformation that sweeps away the crazed conservatism and backwardness of the fundamentalists but, more than that, opens up the world of Islam to new ideas which are seen to be more advanced than what is currently on offer from the west.

This would necessitate a rigid separation of state and mosque; the dissolution of the clergy; the assertion by Muslim intellectuals of their right to interpret the texts that are the collective property of Islamic culture as a whole; the freedom to think freely and rationally and the freedom of imagination. Unless we move in this direction we will be doomed to reliving old battles and thinking not of a richer and humane future, but of how we can move from the present to the past. It is an unacceptable vision. I've let my pen run away with me and preached my heresies for too long. I doubt that I will change, but I hope you will.

P.S.

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