

Wednesday February 12, 2014

The test of any demagogue

By Jim Taylor

I read a disturbing book recently – *Infidel*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

It's disturbing on two counts. First, because it attacks Islam. I don't like attacking someone else's religion, just as I don't like someone else attacking mine. But second, *Infidel* is disturbing because it's hard to disagree with someone's personal experience. I may question someone's opinions; I can't question her experience.

In *Infidel*, Ayaan Ali shares her childhood as a young girl in Muslim enclaves of Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. She describes, in excruciating detail, her beatings, her humiliations, her genital mutilation. She tells how she used clan loyalties to survive. She writes of submitting, unhesitatingly, to male domination.

Until finally, while being flown to Canada for an arranged marriage to a man she loathed, she escaped to Holland. Granted asylum, she adapted to a new culture, earned a degree in political science, and was eventually elected to the Dutch parliament.

Root causes

By then, she had become convinced that Islam itself caused the conflicts between Muslim immigrants and the Dutch culture. To avoid perceptions of prejudice, Dutch police deliberately did not mention race or religion in crime statistics. Ali brought in legislation requiring them to record honour killings of women. The statistics proved shocking.

But her actions enraged hard-line Muslims.

An associate was murdered on the street in Amsterdam. A note, stabbed onto his chest, held her responsible.

She escaped again, to the U.S.

Ali argues that floggings, stonings, amputations, beheadings, honor killings, and genital mutilations are not occasional aberrations. Nor are they restricted to a few radical fundamentalists. They are, she insists, intrinsic to a seventh century mindset. Because the Qur'an claims to come directly from Allah through Mohammed, its teachings can't be doubted, questioned, or re-interpreted. To do so would set up one's own reason as equal to God's.

Thus any deviation from traditional norms becomes apostasy.

Negative emotions

I don't know enough about Islam to judge the validity of her analysis.

But as I read her story, one theme kept coming through to me – it is easier to foment hate than to foment love.

Over and over, in country after country, she describes how devout believers – I'm tempted to call them rabble-rousers – whipped up local Muslims to be more fervent. To be less tolerant of other religions, other cultures. To set themselves apart from the impure. To hate the unholy – including any in their own midst who might have defiled Islam. To build fences, to defend traditions, to reject outside influences...

Ayaan Ali writes only about Islam. She doesn't criticize other faiths. But I see the same tactics in Christianity, in Hinduism, in Judaism. They're not even restricted to religion. They're used in sports, in the military, in politics -- to demonize the enemy.

It's always easier to incite negative emotions than positive ones.

Indeed, I'd argue that, just as you cannot legislate goodness or generosity, you cannot harangue audiences into being kind or thoughtful. You cannot browbeat people into going out and being gentle. You cannot promote tolerance by frothing at the mouth. The means contradicts the supposed end.

The test of any demagogue is the emotions he exploits.

Copyright © 2014 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups, and links from other blogs, welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns. But if you forward a column, please identify yourself as the sender, so that I don't get accused of sending out spam!

To send comments on this column, to subscribe or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

I'm glad that you folks had fun with last week's column, in which I played with the ideas of nothingness.

David Hills wrote, with a shade of sarcasm, I think, "Thanks Jim, now I have a headache from the dancing elephants in my head that I'm trying not to think of!"

"You reminded me of a spiritual director who, while leading a clergy retreat, asked us to go outside, look up into the night sky and try not to see the Big Dipper. He claimed that after multiple attempts he was finally able to see the stars without seeing it. I've never been able to pull it off myself... but I do keep trying now and then."

Ralph Milton said something similar: "Thanks for the migraine. I'm glad I'm a story teller, not a philosopher or a logician or a mathematician or whatever."

That pesky elephant kept popping up. Jim Henderschedt wrote, "I think I want to thank you for planting the image of an elephant in my mind that won't leave. It stands beside the 900 pound gorilla that church councils in the past have introduced me to. Your article is as challenging as unraveling the Gordian Knot. Gives me something to do and think about as the snow and ice continue to accumulate outside. At least I will not be caught in the mire of thinking about nothing."

Bill Peterson noted that "The fiction writer, L. E. Modesitt, Jr, carried your theme to an extreme by writing a series of books about certain persons who could imagine material things into existence! They had to sleep in lead-lined rooms because their minds could do that while sleeping & dreaming!"

Gary Taylor is not related to me, but our minds work similarly. "Love the musings," Gary wrote. "I think I wrote in the past that there is no 'darkness', only the absence of light and there is no 'cold', only the absence of heat (as I go outside to start my car in the -25 F, -32 C, absence of heat). Same thing with 'nothingness', there is only the absence of 'something'. Time, however, is a different beast. If you think about it there is only 'now' and a series of 'nows'. The past is our remembrances of other 'nows' and the future is our projections and hopes for new 'nows'. Try that on for a brain teaser!"

Lyle Phillips recalled "an essay I wrote in my last year in high school. I couldn't think of a topic so I decided to write about nothing. It was titled 'Nothing' and was later printed in the Year Book. On looking back now (yes, I still have the 1958 Como Lake High yearbook) I see that I was writing about the word 'nothing' rather than the idea of nothing which you expounded on so well. I guess that has a lot to do with maturity."

Finally, Ginny Adams reported that her “daily ‘cat’ calendar has a cute kitten relaxing to the max. The caption below it is ‘There’s never enough time to do all the nothing you want.’ The quote is attributed to Bill Watterson, in the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip. My cats always show me how to do nothing, all day long. Makes me jealous at times.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalms 119 is not a favourite of mine, I must confess, simply because of its length. It reminds me of some writers who, having achieved some success with their first book, feel no need henceforth to prune their verbosity down to a core story. Still, some of its excerpts stand well on their own.

1 How fortunate are those who have not fouled up their lives!

They can hold their heads high in God's presence.

2 They are single-minded in pursuing God's way;

They are not tempted to turn aside.

3 They try not to harm anyone;

They follow the Lord's footsteps.

4 For God has gone this way before us;

5 God, help me to follow you faithfully.

6 As long as I can keep my eyes on your example,

I will not disgrace myself;

7 My feet will not stumble, and my stride will not slacken.

I can come before you with a clean conscience.

8 I want to walk humbly with you, God –

To seek justice and live kindness.

Please walk with me.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
