

## **The Incredible Muslim Hulk proves to be no friend of Islam either**

Waleed Aly, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 September 2012

WHERE do I start? Perhaps with the viral image that will come to define this episode: a child who'd be three or four hoisting a sign triumphantly above his head blaring "Behead all those who insult the Prophet" while a woman, presumably his mother, thinks this is cute enough to capture on her smartphone. Alternatively, I could begin with the observation that the trailer for the anti-Islamic film that ostensibly started this all, *Innocence of Muslims*, is now a blockbuster, with YouTube hits in the millions thanks largely to the protesters around the world who think nobody should see it.

No. Let's start with the fact that so few of the protesters who descended on Sydney's CBD this weekend seem actually to have seen the film that so gravely offends them. When asked by journalists, they bluntly admit this, one even adding that she refuses to watch something so offensive. It's almost impressive how cyclical this stupidity is. But it's also instructive. In fact, this is the key to making sense of something so gobsmackingly senseless. The protesters - at least the ones quoted in news reports - know nothing except how offended they are

That, you see, is all that matters. This isn't about a film. It's about an excuse. We know because we've seen it all before, like when Pakistani protesters vandalised American fast food outlets and burnt effigies of President George W. Bush in response to the Danish cartoons.

We know because so much of the weekend's ranting was nakedly gratuitous: "Our dead are in paradise, your dead are in hell". Pardon? Which dead? Weren't we talking about a movie?

This is the behaviour of a drunkenly humiliated people: swinging wildly with the hope of landing a blow, any blow, somewhere, anywhere. There's nothing strategic or calculated about this. It doesn't matter that they are the film's most effective publicists. It doesn't matter that they protest using offensive slogans and signs, while protesting against people's right to offend. It doesn't matter that they object to insulting people on the basis of their religion, while declaring that Christians have no morals. This is baffling only until you realise these protesters are not truly protesting to make a point. The protest is the point.

It feels good. It feels powerful. This is why people yell pointlessly or punch walls when frustrated. It's not instrumental. It doesn't achieve anything directly. But it is catharsis. Outrage and aggression is an intoxicating prospect for the powerless.

Accordingly, it is not an option to leave an insult unanswered because that is a sign of weakness, rather than transcendence.

The irony is that it grants an extraordinary level of power to those doing the offending. It puts them constantly at the centre of your world. That's why, when Gallup polled 35 Muslim majority countries, it found that of all the gripes the Muslim world has against the West, among the most pervasive is the West's "disrespect for Islam".

And it is this disrespect that is the overarching grievance that subsumes others. Everything, global and local, can be thrown into this vortex: Swiss minaret bans, French niqab bans, military invasions, drone strikes, racist stereotyping, anti-immigrant politics, and yes, even films so ridiculously bad that, left to their own devices, they would simply lampoon themselves.

This is what gives *Innocence of Muslims* meaning: not its content, but its context. It's a symbol of contempt, which is why protests against it so quickly turn into an orgy of anti-Americanism. So, "Obama, Obama, we love Osama" they scream, mainly because it's the most offensive rhyme they can muster. Osama, too, is a symbol; the most repugnant one in their arsenal. How better to prove you exist than to say something outrageous?

That the Obama administration immediately condemned the film in the strongest terms doesn't register. Nor that the White House took the extraordinary (and ultimately unsuccessful) step of asking Google to pull the video. This is invisible to an audience of humiliated souls waiting desperately to be offended and conflate every grievance. Indeed, they need the offence. It gives them the chance to assert themselves so they can feel whole, righteous even. It's a shortcut to self-worth.

The trouble is that in our digital world, there is always something to oblige. Anyone can Google their prejudices, and there is always enraging news to share with others. Entire online communities gather around the sharing of offensive material and subsequent communal venting. Soon you have a subculture: a sub-community whose very cohesion is based almost exclusively on shared grievance. Then you have an identity that has nothing to say about itself; an identity that holds an entirely impoverished position: that to be defiantly angry is to be.

Frankly, Muslims should find that prospect nothing short of catastrophic. It renders Islamic identity entirely hollow. All pride, all opposition, no substance. "Like the Incredible Hulk," observes Abdal Hakim Murad, a prominent British Islamic scholar, "ineffectual until provoked."

Sometimes you need a scandal to demonstrate an underlying disease. And that's the good news here. The vast bulk of Saturday's protesters were peaceful, and Muslim community organisations are lining up to condemn the outbreak of violence. But now a more serious conversation is necessary. One that's not about how we should be speaking out to defend our prophet and ourselves. One that's more about whether we can speak about anything else.

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