

## Shame on you, North & South

### New Zealand monthly magazine sows the seeds of community discord

In *North & South's* issue of April 2013, journalist Mark Scott claims a "brand of Islam" that approves wife-beating, female genital mutilation and the death penalty for homosexuals is "expanding into New Zealand". In reply to his article, which was headlined *Tolerating Intolerance*, I submitted the following comments, which include some of the findings of my research into FGM. Needless to say, there was no acknowledgement from the editor. The West has freedom of the press, but don't expect serious dissent to get into print.

## TOLERATING INTOLERANCE: A REBUTTAL

By Basil Throckmorton

*Tolerating Intolerance*, the article by Mark Scott in the April 2013 edition of *North & South*, is not the first article in a New Zealand magazine to raise the spectre of "female circumcision" (otherwise known as female genital mutilation or FGM) in relation to Islam. Notorious Islamophobe John Laffin, who visited New Zealand in 1986, gave us all the gruesome details in an article by Alexander Fry in the *NZ Listener* of March 7, 1987.

What most people don't realize is that FGM is a universal phenomenon, in that it has been practised in most societies at some time or another. In the *Ladies' Handbook of Home Treatment* (1912), we find that it was recommended in Western society before World War I. After discussing male circumcision, the author continues, "A fact almost unknown among the laity is that girls sometimes require a slight operation which somewhat resembles circumcision in the boy, a procedure which yields favourable results out of all proportion to the extent of the operation. Any girl who does not yield to the ordinary measures employed in the treatment of self-abuse should be examined with a view to having this operation performed if it be required."

In *Orificial Surgery, its Philosophy, Application and Technique*, which was last published by Western Baptist Publication Co in 1925, editor B.E. Dawson, M.D., writes "...girls have been neglected...I do feel an irresistible impulse to cry out against the shameful neglect of the clitoris and its hood, because of the vast amount of sickness and suffering which could be saved the gentler sex if this important subject received proper attention and appreciation at the hands of the profession. *Circumcision for the girl or woman of any age is as necessary as for the boy or man.*" (Emphasis added.)

But that is not all. As Alex Comfort notes in *The Anxiety Makers* (1967), "[Luther E.] Holt's *Diseases of Infancy and Childhood* (New York) continued until 1936 to recommend 'circumcision in boys, and is not averse to circumcision in girls or cauterization of the clitoris', presumably as a treatment for "self-abuse".

Comfort observes that religion was also "pressed into service", and quotes the *Journal of Orificial Surgery* as saying that, "by genital and rectal operations, 'the body shall be released from every fetter that binds and the spirit directed Godward'."

In view of the prevalence of FGM in sub-Saharan Africa since prehistoric times, one should not be surprised by its incorporation in the Islamic canon by some local authorities — or by their discovery (invention?) of holy writ in support of one or more of the various forms of the practice. This does not mean that FGM is coextensive with Islam, or that enlightened Muslim opinion in any way condones it. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, for example, states:

"'Female circumcision', even as a purely symbolic act, a light excision of skin (*khifad*), is not a practice recommended by religion; but it has been apparently tolerated as custom. Such a practice, while serving no purpose except as an imitation of male circumcision, normally did not go so far as to be a mutilation; usually it was harmless. There also exist, however,

practices such as clitoridectomy, and/or removal of the labia; these are a grave violence against the person and are strictly forbidden in Islam. Such practices are found in some backward milieus and are due to gross ignorance; they have absolutely no religious basis and are not sanctioned by Islamic law."

The website [alislam.org](http://alislam.org) states: "The only firm conclusion that can be ascertained ... is that this was a custom practiced prior to the time of Islam and continued in the time of the Holy Prophet (saw), which was not declared by Islamic law to be *haram*, or advised against. However, neither was it instructed to be a part of the Islamic law."

I have not heard of "female circumcision", in any of its many forms, being performed in New Zealand. If anyone has heard that it *is* being performed here, he or she should come forward with the information, so that it can be stopped immediately. And in the meantime, the whole matter should be viewed in its proper perspective.

In Islam, it is axiomatic that profound knowledge is a sine qua non for any exposition of the faith or related topics. And it goes without saying that this cannot be acquired by dipping into a couple of books and engaging a few people in desultory conversation. For this reason, Mark Scott falls at the first hurdle — by failing to recognize that Arabic, like other Semitic languages, is full of metaphors and hyperboles. One of the most common of these is the claim that such-and-such an action, performed at such-and-such a time, in such-and-such a place, is "worth" 10, 100 or 1000 times as much as the same action performed under other circumstances. You might also hear, for example, that when you awake in the morning, you should clean your nose three times. Why? Because Satan spends the night in the upper part of the nose, according to a *hadith* related by Al-Bukhari.

Are these pernickety instructions, and the language they are couched in, always to be taken literally? Scott assumes they are, and cites some of them to make Islam look silly — or evil, as in the case of the stipulations for the *hudud* punishments. Islam is thus presented as something to be either ridiculed or condemned, depending on one's inclination at any given moment. But some scholars argue that, in many instances, such figures of speech are used, in Islamic discourse, to effectively make a point. In the case of Satan allegedly spending the night in one's nose, they argue that this illustration, which would have made perfect sense to people in a hot, dry climate, was simply the Prophet's way of telling people to clear stuffy nasal passages in the morning.

Christianity does not, of course, contain any such detailed instructions for everyday life. That is because Christianity is not a Semitic religion, but a Hellenistic mystery cult with Semitic pretensions that seeks legitimacy by anchoring itself in the Judaic tradition. Its elevation of Jesus to the status of literal Son of God is a result, again, of the inability of outsiders to distinguish between figure of speech and reality. The reality was that "son of God" was a description, in Palestine at the time of Jesus, of someone who was following the "path of righteousness". Such a person was not, and was never considered to be, divine.

Mark Scott has not produced a work of scholarship, or even a good polemic. Like Alexander Fry before him, he has produced a hatchet job, and one in which he cannot even correctly describe one of his principal sources of information — Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri's *The Reliance of the Traveller*, as translated by Noah Ha Mim Keller. This is not, as Scott claims, a work that "lists the rules or *hadiths* of Islam — and Koranic texts", but rather, as Keller says, "one of the finest and most reliable short works of Shafi'i jurisprudence...virtually an index of the conclusions of the *Majmu*" of Imam Nawawi, "the great thirteenth-century Shafi'i *hadith* scholar and jurist...". In other words, it's a work of *fiqh* (human interpretation of the laws), rather than of *shari'ah* (divine laws).

Any work written centuries ago inevitably includes ideas that don't commend themselves to the 21st-century intellect or sensibility. To prove that point, I went to what might be described as an analogous work — *Summa Theologiae*, by Thomas Aquinas, which was written between 1265 and 1274. Opening it at random, I soon found a shockingly misogynistic assertion that "the strong stirrings of wickedness which mostly affect old women...produce changes in the subtle spirits of the bewitcher's own body, which then radiate out through the eyes in

poisonous looks to infect the surrounding air and, in particular, the tender bodies of children".

This is worse than an absurdity. It is an incitement to hatred, a spur to the witch-hunting hysteria that reached its hideous crescendo in the 17th century. But should we, because of it, dismiss the entire work? I would suggest that, in our approach to any ancient text, we keep in mind the words of Edgar Hopida, one of the few intelligent reviewers of *Reliance of the Traveller* at amazon.com: "The post 9/11 reviews...just prove that one cannot learn simply from a book. In traditional Islamic studies, one learns the text with a qualified teacher who not only explains the book (terminology, etc.) but also lays out the context and applicability of certain rulings nowadays."

Such a teacher would probably point out, in passing, that the *hudud* punishments are not to be imposed, as they were in Sudan between 1983 and 1985, as a political gambit by a secular ruler who sees profit in playing the "Islamic card" — without understanding anything about *shari'ah*. If they are to be imposed — and that's a big "if", in view of the widespread opposition to them in the Muslim world — they are to be imposed only when *shari'ah* is fully implemented, when society is firmly established on an equitable basis, when proper courts are functioning, and when the standards of proof are so stringent that their imposition would be possible in only the most egregious cases.

Let us not forget that the ideal Muslim society is one in which the Muslim does not spy on his neighbours, does not indulge in malicious gossip, "conceals his brother's or sister's faults", and is fair and charitable to all — including the non-Muslims he finds in his midst. While rightly insisting on respect for certain immutable principles, it is intrinsically tolerant and inclusive, rather than intolerant and exclusive.

Diatribes against it by journalists who, by their own admission, have never studied it only reinforce popular prejudice, and strengthen the conviction that "they" are not like "us" and should be kept under constant surveillance in the interests of "national security". Do we need this sort of division in New Zealand? Whose interest would be served by such a division, which would inevitably see the Muslim community become more isolated and defensive?

Perhaps most disappointing, however, is the cultural arrogance that underlies these attacks, and the implicit assumption that there can be no comeback: That Islam is so backward, and Muslims so inarticulate, the only possible responses are either a blushing admission of inferiority or a paroxysm of spluttering rage. Journalists who wouldn't dream of ridiculing Judaism, despite its many idiosyncratic practices, have no reservations where Islam is concerned. Islam, it seems, is "fair game" — as the Scientologists so deplorably describe their opponents.

Yes, L. Ron Hubbard would have understood this perfectly.

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