

OPINION

AYAAN'S ALLAH IS AN IDOL

By Rachel Woodlock

ABC RELIGION AND ETHICS | 30 JUL 2010

Every Saturday morning, my six-year old daughter Yasmin attends a madrassah in suburban Melbourne held in a community hall next to an oval where local footy teams battle for amateur glory. The madrassah class have been learning that Allah wants his followers to look after those less fortunate than themselves.

"Be good to your parents and relatives and orphans and paupers and close neighbours and distant neighbours, and the companion by your side, and the traveller on the road, and those in your legitimate custody" (Qur'an 4:37).

The children have received a visit from special guest Maithri, a Christian doctor invited to share news of his Swaziland orphanage project. Being the perfect opportunity to engage in interfaith cooperation, and put Allah's message of caring into practice, Yasmin and her classmates collected toys and wrote heartfelt letters of sharing, for Maithri to give to children a world away in distance and opportunity.

This is the Islam I know and love, far removed from the polemical caricature offered by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, currently visiting Australia to promote her latest book, *Nomad*.

Raised in Australia, I became a Muslim in the 1990s, long before 11 September 2001 turned Islam's Western followers into suspect fifth columnists.

I'd always had a vague knowledge of the Arabian prophet, but it was not until I began studying the language of the holy Qur'an at university that I realised Islam is my spiritual home.

I studied Arabic in Yemen, gained a Master of Islamic Studies and am currently analysing questionnaire responses from six hundred religious Muslim Australians to understand how they see their place in Australian society.

I am introducing myself so as to explain some of the exasperation I feel when I read damning generalisations of Islam and Muslims based on little more than inflammatory polemics.

But when the vast majority of peaceable Muslims are dismissed as being ignorant of the true nature of Islam, that for me is the last straw.

The real ignorance is the lack of religious literacy amongst non-Muslims that allows a whole generation of polemicists - Ayaan Hirsi Ali among them - blithely to repeat the most astonishing howlers ad nauseam to the unsuspecting reader perusing the shelves of Borders or surfing the Internet trying to understand why some people calling themselves Muslims seem intent on causing violence and mayhem.

If someone asserts, without even a single credible reference, that Jesus was a violent revolutionary who said: "I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword" (Matthew 10:34), then at least even the most religiously illiterate among us knows that this is not how Christians themselves understand Jesus' statement.

But until very recently the religion of the Prophet Muhammad remained outside the interest and concern of the average Westerner, leaving a dangerous lacuna.



HIRSI ALI IS ASKING MUSLIMS TO REJECT ONE FALSE GOD FOR ANOTHER FALSE GOD THAT ISN'T QUITE AS BAD

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AYAAN HIRSI ALI, CIS

"The right to speak freely and without fear or censure is being gradually and insidiously eroded by the rising threats of terrorism and political correctness."

As Daniel Varisco writes in *Islam Obscured*, "Recent collective cultural memories, whether premeditated or self-mediated, comprise an inescapably politicized litany: oil embargo, hostage crisis, mad mullahs, shoe-string budgeted airplane hijackings, skyscraper terrorism, Hamas suicide bombers, and the uncivilized clash with a post-red, green menace of fundamentalist militants."

Varisco goes on to lament, "The cycle of blaming victims and victimizers from CNN crossfiring to talk-radio jockeying and Internet chat rooms, ensures that 'Islam' will be viewed suspiciously as a 'problem' by Americans and Europeans for the foreseeably intolerant future."

But just as we would not consider Christian identity militants, hardline racist Israeli settlers, or violent Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalists to be representative of Christians, Jews and Buddhists respectively, nor should we imagine Usama bin Ladin and his ilk are representative of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims.

This includes the 340,000 who live in Australia, who adhere to the Qur'anic command: "Call on your Sustainer with humility and in private. Lo! He loves not aggressors. Hence, do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. And call unto Him with fear and longing: Lo! The mercy of God is near to those who do good." (Qur'an 7:55-56)

The most fundamental error in Hirsi Ali's *Nomad*, is her peddling of a violent, fundamentalist vision of Islam, contrasting it to an idealised Christian West.

Hirsi Ali recognises the positive aspects of Christianity and dismisses problematic issues within the Church as accidental, whereas she does the reverse for Islam. The worst excesses of a minority become representative of the totality of Islam, whereas any grudgingly conceded positive aspect is dismissed as being inauthentic to true Islam.

For example, she lauds the modern Catholic Church as a more tolerant institution, open to criticism, yet that same institution has most recently received scathing criticism for Pope Benedict's letter making the "crime" of ordaining women on par with priests' sexual abuse of children.

She says the relationship between the various Christian denominations is now largely peaceful. But this is not because of any inherent Christian non-partisanship.

From earliest times Christianity has been riven by factionalism, as Bart Ehrman describes in *The Lost Christianities*.

Even in Australia, my parents remember when Catholic/Protestant sectarianism had devastating effect on families. My own grandmother's Catholic family refused to enter her house, because of her marriage to my Protestant grandfather.

Rather, the current positive state of ecumenism amongst the mainstream churches is because of the secular process of divesting churches of State power, that is: the ability to apply violence in the pursuit of its goals.

The churches did not give this up willingly or easily and there are branches of Christianity that would seek to reclaim it back. One need only look at the heady dose of fundamentalist Christianity that infuses the Tea Party movement in the United States.

None of this means that the vast majority of modern Christians are not peaceable, productive citizens of Western societies. Unlike atheists like Dawkins who legitimately decry religion used in the exercise of political power, but make the mistake of attributing violence and delusion as inherent within religion, I suggest that all the great religious and philosophical traditions of the world - including Islam - have rich spiritual treasures that help human beings reach their highest potential.

There is a notion within Islamic teachings that human beings have the ability to be higher than the angels, or lower than the worst animals. It seems religion is the crucible that tests the difference.

I would long for Ayaan Hirsi Ali to shift her gaze away from her troubled past, to the great Muslim heroes and heroines of the past and of today.

In her introduction to *Nomad*, she writes, "The will of little girls is stifled by Islam. By the time they menstruate they are rendered voiceless. They are reared to become submissive robots who serve in the house as cleaners and cooks. They are required to comply with their father's choice of a mate, and after the wedding their lives are devoted to the sexual pleasures of their husband and to a life of childbearing. Their education is often cut short when they are still young girls, and thus as women they are wholly unable to prepare their own children to become successful citizens in modern, Western societies."

This is not what research on Australian Muslims shows us. For example, Helen McCue's research has found in her examination of the 2006 Australian census, "Significant numbers of Muslim women are undertaking and participating in tertiary education successfully. Some 17.5% of Muslim women in the 18 plus age bracket have a bachelors degree or higher. This compares extremely favourably with the 18% of total Australian women in the same age range and with the same qualifications."

While Muslim women's employment status in Australia is significantly less than the general female population, it is increasing at each census count, and currently stands at 31%, with women being employed in wide and diverse fields.

Hirsi Ali claims that Muslim minds are blinkered due to an unquestioned blind obedience to the Qur'an and to the Prophet Muhammad. She writes, "Allah may demand immoral or unreasonable behaviour, for he is all-powerful and demands absolute submission." She quotes Pope Benedict as saying "God cannot ask you to do something unreasonable".

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BARNEY ZWARTZ, THE AGE

"Julia Gillard has agreed to be interviewed by the Australian Christian Lobby today in an attempt to recover ground with churchgoers."

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PETER HITCHENS, MAIL ONLINE

"There is a strong chance that we will soon lose Turkey to the Islamic world, much as we lost Iran to the ayatollahs 30 years ago. And there is not much we can do about it - least of all the daft scheme to include this nation in the EU."

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Scott Stephens



Scott Stephens is the Religion and Ethics editor for ABC Online. Before joining the ABC he taught theology for many years, and even did a stint as a parish minister with the Uniting Church in Australia. He has written extensively on the intersections among philosophy, theology, ethics and politics, as well as on modern atheism's dependence on the Christian legacy.

He is a regular contributor to *The Drum*, *Eureka Street* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. He has edited and translated (with Rex Butler) two volumes of the *Selected Works* of the highly influential philosopher and cultural critic, Slavoj Zizek - including *The Universal Exception*, which was named by The Guardian newspaper one of its "Books of the Year" in 2007.

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It is not my intention to attack the Catholic Church (in fact some of my favourite Irish in-laws are Catholic) but there are many who would criticise Pope Benedict's God as "unreasonable" for prohibiting the use of contraception in AIDS-torn Africa, preventing priests from marrying, or excommunicating anyone who might dare to ordain a woman priest.

Of course the requirements of religions - including both Christianity and Islam - are mediated through the interpretations of fallible human beings.

Christians once believed the earth was the centre of the universe, and today there are those who think that killing abortion doctors is God's "reasonable" will.

However, the vast majority of Christians take a much more ethical and nuanced approach to the teachings of the Bible.

Likewise, while there do exist Muslims such as Bin Laden, who exalt a controversial approach to Islamic ethics, abrogating everything but a violent, triumphalist reading of the Qur'an. But those of us who belong to the mainstream point out that some of the Prophet's last revealed verses promote interfaith harmony.

For example, in the last sermon the Prophet delivered before his death, appears one of the last-revealed verses of the Qur'an giving permission for Muslims to break-bread with, and even marry Jews and Christians:

"Today, wholesome things are permitted to you. And the food of those to whom scripture was given is permitted to you, and your food is permitted to them. And so are chaste, believing women, and chaste women from among those to whom scripture was given before you." (Qur'an 5:5)

As Reuven Firestone points out in *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, it is incorrect to presume a consensus on a Qur'anic evolution moving from initial pacifism, to self-defence, to unlimited warfare to assert the dominance of Islam.

There is no "clash of civilizations," despite what either Bin Laden or Hirsi Ali says. What we are seeing are the difficult birth-pangs of a world-community moving beyond crass tribalism and nationalism, into the borderless global melange, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse calls it.

Instead of fearing the diversity that migrants bring, unsettling the essentialist narratives of Western hegemony, might we not celebrate our diversity and share a common vision based on our humanity: Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Atheists, Agnostics and Muslims alike?

But finally, let me make an observation about Hirsi Ali's strange proposition that Christians - Catholics in particular - should engage in a proselytising competition to convert Muslims away from Islam.

Hirsi Ali is an atheist. Indeed, she counts among her friends and admirers, celebrity atheists Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. She does not believe in a supernatural realm that includes one or more deities.

For her, the Christian God does not exist, therefore one of the most central claims of Christianity - that Jesus is the Son of God, sent to redeem humanity through his death on the cross - does not have any existential veracity.

So why does she want to co-opt Christianity to convert Muslims away from Islam? The answer: to rescue Muslims and protect the West.

In effect, Hirsi Ali is asking Muslims to reject one false god for another false god that isn't quite as bad, implying that the people of colour she castigates Western liberals for molycoddling, need to latch onto someone else's unreal deity, in order to civilise them.

What Christian could view this as anything but disrespectful to the beliefs they hold dear? What Muslim could fail to be insulted at this crass, racist colonialism?

There is nothing in this strange proposition that hints of a genuine commitment to truth, despite her claim to cherish Enlightenment values.

Rachel Woodlock is a researcher and lecturer, based at the Centre for Islam and the Modern World, Monash University, Melbourne.

 Comment

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PAT :

06 AUG 2010 3:28:11AM

Gazza,

Muslims have not been malignd in the West; it is the theological system of Islam, fueled by the Quran and Ahadith that is

being questioned (as much as anyone else, such as yourself, questions Christianity). Since, as you state, "...it gives her a platform to justifiably complain about her atrocious treatment by her family and community," wouldn't it be reasonable for Hirsan Ali to speak about her treatment by devout Muslims who use the Quran to teach hatred and violence toward everyone else? Is it also reasonable for a rape victim to rightly complain about her treatment by the rapist(s)? Is it the victim's or the rapist's fault? You also claim, "It also gives her conservative barrackers the opportunity to push for the same treatment of Muslims as was meted out to her." Nobody has called for the rape, subjugation and deaths of Muslims. Please inform me of the equal good (expressed to all) that Islam has brought into this world, as has Christianity? I am more than happy with Muslims who don't seek to dominate the world through Jihad, Dawa and Shariah. If there are Muslims who are tarnishing your religion, then shouldn't you voice against them and not against those who are doing the same, such as Wilders and Hirsi Ali? Do you voice your concern about Wahhabis at your Mosque? What has your Imam said?

I apologise for some confusion toward the end of the post, as my comment was truncated by the 500 word limit. I tried to append it, but it remains unposted. My conclusion was as follows, "With your conclusion on Hirsi Ali, you mention she's an Atheist and doesn't believe that Christ is the Son of God, among other beliefs, which disqualifies her from criticising Islam. As a Muslima, do you believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate and that by faith/trust/belief in His Atoning Work on the Cross is sufficient alone to save one from sin? As Muslims do not believe this, which I suspect you don't, are we now to cast your statements into doubt? Please refrain from your ad-hominem attacks ad-nauseam."

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GRIZZLE :

02 AUG 2010 2:25:57PM

Yeoh, I agree Hirsi is off the mark in many respects, however your defence of Islam is rather myopic. I once witnessed at an Interfaith convention a Muslim and Buddhist Women agree to meet to discuss faith issues - in many muslim countries this would not be tolerated, in some she would be jailed or beaten or worse.

I agree that much Islamic scripture has been re-worked to facilitate political agenda's and this wave of Islam dominates the perception of many in the west, including followers of Islam. Is there a parallels here with the militant extremes of the christian church (which I would label anti-christ) and maybe with the Lutheran Church in Germany which came under the wing of the Nazi Party?

There is a polarisation effect - leaders of many Islam nations remain quiet at the acts of Islamic Extremists and by default are held guilty by association with these groups - the reality is that there is not a significant portion of Muslims or leaders speaking out against violence in the name of Allah (paralleling Martin Luther King, Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu who were ready to preach against the church where it supported violence or injustice). Lastly I will rail against the press who have exacerbated the perceptions of Muslims, encouraging the linking of all Muslims to violence which of course is preposterous and evil.

Muslims have become scapegoats in some respects however I am looking for leadership to emerge to correct the perceptions.

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GAZZA :

01 AUG 2010 8:31:41PM

Well done Rachel. I loved the line about the Christian Fundamentalism "infusing" the Tea Party in the United States. If only we could open all the fundamentalist tea infusers in all religions and dump the whole rotten contents in the bin.

I too am sick and tired of the likes of Ayan Hirsi Ali. Her approach of spraying her accusations at Islam and all Muslims in general like birdshot from a shotgun ignores a peaceful mainstream who simply want to live a peaceful life.

Her patronage by conservative think tanks mutually enables each to pursue their own agendas. In her case it gives her a platform to justifiably complain about her atrocious treatment by her family and community. It also gives her conservative barrackers the opportunity to push for the same treatment of Muslims as was meted out to her.

On the Catholic side of things my father was the product of a mixed Catholic/Protestant marriage and his parents my grandmother in particular received similar treatment to your grandparents. It is easy to criticise the Catholic church and Christianity for its wrongdoings but this would also ignore the enormous good it has brought as well. The same applies to Islam. Ayan Hirsi's clarion call to some sort of cultural jihad against Islam and Muslims is doing exactly the same. Worse still it is silencing the voices of Muslims who seek engagement with the world and to deal with the very problems that poisoned her own upbringing.

Pat's comments were loaded with a lot of the usual muddle-headed accusations so commonly used by polemicists like Ayan Hirsi Ali. Her worst excess though was asking if you believed, as in her view all Muslims do, that Jesus (Peace be upon him) was God incarnate and in all the Christian doctrine that accompanies that belief. I don't know where she got that peculiar idea from but I do know from personal experience that this is one of the great struggles of converts to Islam when they are considering converting from Christianity. It was not until I realised that both the Qur'an and the prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) was calling me to believe in Jesus as a great human being and a Prophet of God that I saw my way clear to become a Muslim.

As such I practice a religion that calls on me to be peaceful, productive and humble before God. That is Islam, not the straw man falsely offered up by Ayan Hirsi Ali and her ilk

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ROBT :

01 AUG 2010 11:03:59AM

Rachael Woodlocks article responding to Ayan Hiri Ali's call for moderate Muslims to examine alternate religious values, smacks of Islamic apologist rhetoric. She presents that Ali's representations of Islam are biased and misrepresentative.

However, blind Freddy can see that Ali writes from not only excruciating personal experience, but also from an intelligent woman's perspective looking at a wider picture and drawing rational conclusions. In her writings and talks from what I have read and heard, Ali does not claim all Muslims are violent, ideologically driven, misogynists. Nor does she claim that all Muslim women are downtrodden, however she does point to an increasing trend in many Muslim communities to an acceptance of the worst aspects of Islam, under the increasing power of the fundamentalist religious leaders.

Why is it that the majority Muslims seem to have an issue with recognising this obvious fact? Why do they not feel able to stand up and criticise the worst aspects of this increasing trend? Could it possibly be the threat of repercussions from the violent Islamicists?

Ayan Hirsu Ali daily shows enormous courage for her commitment to reforming the worst aspects of Islam. It's a shame moderate Muslims such as Ms. Woodlock cannot admit to the rot that is happening to Islam, nor find the spine to challenge it directly.

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PAT :

31 JUL 2010 4:02:01AM

Mrs. Woodlock, your moral equivalence arguments are seriously flawed. Bin Laden openly professes Islam as his religion; Buddhists don't claim Christianity (as you mentioned). It's not that he represents all Muslims (approx. 1.5 Billion), just the 10% who believe the same way he does, which roughly equates to over 100 Million. Jesus Christ taught that we should love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and there is nowhere He advocated violence to spread the Gospel and, in fact, rejected it (John 18:36). Mohammad, however, taught that Muslims are better than everyone else (3:11) and that the gate of Paradise is found under the shadow of the sword (Sahih Muslim, Book 20, Number 4681). Jesus Christ said that God loves the world, including unbelievers (John 3:16) and Allah said God hates unbelievers (30:15). There is a marked difference in the fundamental texts and the moral integrity of the individuals.

Though I'm not Catholic, nor apologise for the Pope, but religious law differs from civil law. Bart Erhman isn't the "scholar" to refer to Christianity, as his views are well outside orthodoxy. The Tea Party movement is not driven by Christian Fundamentalism; it is driven by people who hold to differing worldviews but don't want Government trespass in private life. What one should look at was the Jumaa on the U.S.' Capitol Hill. This prayer encompasses many Islamic beliefs such as the domination of Islam of every nation, which is very different in nature to the Tea Party movement. Do you advocate for the dominance of Islam in every nation? The Quran does state that the vilest of all "beasts" are unbelievers (8:55), which is one of the 28 Late Medinan Surahs, which abrogate earlier Surahs which touched on the subject.

The conclusions of Muslims in Islamic States and their Shariah, are completely different to Muslims in Western States. In the West, Muslimas are permitted equality (even in education), whereas in Islamic theocracies, female citizens are either seriously limited or denied this equality. This is established fact. Not all Christians believed the Earth was flat; in contrast, the Quran states that the Sun, after setting, rests in a spring of murky water (18:86). When contrasting Christianity with another religion, please draw also from Protestantism, not solely Catholicism, as many doctrines of the Catholic church aren't found within the Bible. Are you willing to re-teach Islamic Scholars in the Mid-East and Asia the "peaceful, correct" version of Islam; i.e.: to reform your religion from where it originated?

With your conclusion on Hirsu Ali, you mention she's an Atheist and doesn't believe that Christ is the Son of God, among other beliefs, which disqualifies her from criticising Islam. As a Muslima, do you believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate and that by faith/trust/belief in His Atoning Work on the Cross is sufficient alone to save one from sin? As Muslims do

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RACHEL WOODLOCK :

31 JUL 2010 10:22:49PM

Greetings Pat,

There is a lot to reply to in your message, more than I can encompass in a single message. However I'll choose one thing, that if I'd had more space and time in the article I would have elaborated further originally.

You wrote: "The Quran does state that the vilest of all "beasts" are unbelievers (8:55), which is one of the 28 Late Medinan Surahs, which abrogate earlier Surahs which touched on the subject."

One of the misunderstandings that is currently being disseminated through anti-Islam sites, is the notion that there are whole bunch of "nasty" verses that abrogate (nullify) the "nice" verses of the Qur'an. It's based on a misrepresentation of the legal tool of "abrogation" that was developed in the post-Prophetic scholars as a way of attempting to harmonise what at first glance appeared to be contradictory rulings on a matter and as a way of trying to understand why the early generations of Muslims practiced a particular thing that did not appear in the text of the Qur'an itself, but there was reference to there having been a 'revelation' on the topic in the historical memory of the community.

Abrogation itself is a heavily contested concept. Not all Muslims accept that it is valid (except for the consensus that the most general meaning of abrogation is that the Islamic scripture "abrogates" all older pre-Qur'anic scriptures). Shi'a Muslims, for example, reject the concept, and whilst the majority (not all, Abu Muslim al-Isfahani (d. 933CE) is a famous dissenter) of Sunni scholars came to accept it, there has been wide disagreement among Sunni scholars as to its scope and applicability. For example, some scholars hold that only five verses have been abrogated, at the other end, some hold that around two hundred and fifty (and in one case, close to three hundred) verses have been abrogated. There is no "official" list of what abrogates what, so I question where you get your information from that 8:55 abrogates anything.

What is agreed upon, by those who accept abrogation, is that fundamental rule that abrogation only goes in one chronological direction. Always it must be a later text that abrogates an earlier-revealed text never vice versa. One problem for the scholars discussing abrogation, however, is that there is no agreement as to the chronological dating of all the verses of the Qur'an. Scholars know the rough gist of the 'story' of the Qur'an, but aside from a relatively small number of specific verses that can be dated with accuracy, it is impossible to re-construct the chronology of the Qur'an. What this means, is that whilst Bin Laden and the anti-Islam movement might "like" to propose that the verses dealing with military matters abrogate all the harmony and interfaith verses, this is simply a proposition they hold, and a flawed one at that precisely because of the verses that we can dat

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PAT :

03 AUG 2010 1:59:58AM

Mrs. Woodlock,

Thank you for your prompt reply. It seems we are both victims of automatic truncation. Whether or not (as you argue) abrogation exists, the fact is, that if it doesn't, the Quran offers simultaneous peaceful relations (106:9) and unprovoked violence against anyone who isn't Muslim (9:5). This then turns your "holy book" into a bipolar rambling (at best) and should be discarded. Is anyone who is not Muslim, a vile beast, as the Quran teaches? Many Imams, Muftis, etc. within Islamic

"orthodoxy" proclaim abrogation as one of the core principles for understanding the Quran; without abrogation, 53:19-20 would still read, "Have ye thought upon Al-Lat and Al-Uzza and Manat, the third, the other? These are the exalted cranes, whose intercession is hoped for" which would more than tarnish the Quran's claims and therefore, its authority, as abrogation is necessary also for Mohammad's claim to prophethood. More than 1,000 years of Islamic scholarship has reinforced this doctrine, which you don't agree with; so I, likewise, question your conclusion.

Even if a chronological ordering of the Quran is difficult, it is possible by referring to Ahadith to gain the context of what was said in the Quran, as has been done. Yes, the Shia reject it and the Wahhabi and Sunni embrace it; which one has "misunderstood" the Quran (i.e.: who is wrong)? However, I have not concerned myself fully with abrogation. The core of the matter is thus: are you willing to re-educate the millions of Islamic "misunderstanders" as to the "correct" interpretation of the Quran (yours) and insist that Shariah is therefore void? Why is it that "misunderstanders" of Islam in the West are peaceful, yet "misunderstanders" of Islam in the East (some Muslims now in the West), violent Jihadis?

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