

Why liberals can't handle Hilali

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Sheikh Taj El-Deen El-Hilali really did get it quite wrong (if Dalia Mattar's translation and edited transcript of his speech is correct).

- 'Then it's a look, then a smile, then a conversation, a greeting, then a conversation, then a date, then a meeting, then a crime, then Long Bay jail. Then you get a judge, who has no mercy, and he gives you 65 years,' and Hilali goes on to the now-infamous analogy of raw meat in the sun and the cat who cannot be blamed for eating it. But Jesus says to men that 'anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell' (Matthew 5:28-29).
- 'When it comes to adultery, it's 90 per cent the women's responsibility. ... It is she who takes off her clothes, shortens them, flirts, puts on make-up and powder and takes to the streets, God protect us,' Hilali said. But do women really tempt men in order to have sex with them? In the Bible, women who do are often motivated by what they consider political or economic necessity (e.g. Delilah [Judges 16], or the prostitute [Proverbs 7]). But even then, the men who consent are portrayed as fools and even 'oxen'. The proper response is that of Joseph to Potiphar's wife, who exclaims 'How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' and flees (Genesis 39:9); or the advice of Proverbs: 'Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths' (Proverbs 7:25). Even God's anointed King David, who sees a naked woman on her rooftop, is portrayed as wholly and solely responsible for the lust and adultery that follows. Bathsheba really is narrated as the passive and innocent victim in this terrible episode (2 Samuel 11 & Psalm 51).
- 'Satan tells women you're my weapon to bring down any stubborn man,' according to Hilali. But according to Jesus, what Satan really uses to bring down men, and women, are lies (John 8:44). Even the satanic snake in the garden only had the power of the lie to ruin first Eve, and then Adam (Genesis 3). Here, sex had nothing to do with it; and when Satan does lie about sex, males are hardly immune.

In short, the Bible consistently requires men to take primary and ultimate responsibility for their sexual thoughts and feelings in their relationships with women. This uncompromising demand upon men comes from a part of the world not far from the birthplace of Islam, and is all the more surprising if we have come to believe that the Bible is a 'patriarchal' book.

Indeed when women are called to modesty in the Bible, it is *not* in order to stop men raping them, but in order to set them free—to *relieve* them of the intolerable demand of having to keep on seducing their own husbands by their looks. Rather than relying upon hairstyles, jewellery and clothing, women are encouraged not to 'give way to fear', and to live out a quiet gentleness that expresses their 'inner self'. For scholar Bruce Winter, such modesty relieves women from having to compete with the mistresses who regularly ensnared their pagan husbands. Modern people overreact to this text, thinking it restrictive and oppressive, when in fact it offers the best strategy for a powerless woman to deal with a powerful Roman husband—and then calls upon that husband to be considerate toward his wife, whatever her weaknesses (1 Peter 3:3-7).

Does Hilali share this logic of inner female beauty, and caring male respect? We should note that in his subsequent explanatory statement, he speaks well of women and makes clear that rape is an 'abominable crime', and that it is 'men with diseased souls whose animalistic instincts ... overcome them' whom he really opposes. But only an extended and careful discussion with him would settle whether his initial sermon was grounded in that logic—a kind of discussion that Australians do not seem very good at having.

But even if the Sheikh's views on women were reported too harshly, Australian liberal outrage at his initial comments was still a proper reaction. (By 'liberals' we refer to our political tradition of liberalism, found in both the Liberal and Labor parties.) Hilali's explanation of his comments retains the idea that bad men are somehow 'overcome' by desire; but quite rightly, liberals cannot handle the implication that a woman's dress and conduct can somehow be taken to *overwhelm* a man. To hold that men can be overwhelmed in this way sets the scene for women to be made morally culpable for men's actions. Liberalism and biblical Christianity are very deeply agreed in their opposition to that self-serving male conceit.

But liberals have forgotten that Christianity is the well-spring for their reaction. The question of who is finally responsible for lust was put front-and-centre before Western society in the European Reformation five centuries ago, and the answer (as drawn from the Bible) was decisive: no matter what the provocation, all men everywhere are called to control their sexual thoughts and feelings, and to call upon God for the help of his Spirit when their desires seem uncontrollable. Even when evil men report being 'overcome' by their desires, women are not the primary moral load-bearer in the problem. The men *always* are. The close relationships often enjoyed between men and women in the West rely upon men taking this responsibility, and upon women being able to trust them.

(Of course some women may need to relearn the simple datum that many males think about sex a lot, whether or not they are 'wired' to do so. Every three months, this writer's daughter hears the joke about the two fifteen year-old boys. Says the first, 'Scientists have discovered that fifteen year-old boys think about sex once every seventeen seconds.' 'But that's impossible!' replies his friend. The first boy is insistent—'No, seriously, every seventeen seconds.' 'No, that's outrageous!' cries the second boy. 'What am I meant to do for the other sixteen?' Girls and young women need to be informed of this common male habit. Whether they use this knowledge for good or for evil is over to them and to the women who lead them. Meanwhile, men need to parley together about what makes a man obsess about sex, why men so easily excuse themselves, and what can be done to change.)

But liberals cannot handle Hilali in a second, political sense. They don't know what to do with him, and have tragically overreached themselves when they have tried. Consider the following comments we have gleaned from the news:

- Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, found it 'not good enough just to say he will be silent for three months', which perhaps implies that she thought he should be sacked.
- Liberal MP Warren Entsch's 'first reaction' was 'to hell with him.' Entsch called for revocation of Hilali's permanent residency, and deportation.
- Liberal MP Cameron Thompson went so far as to judge that 'from where I sit he's long outlived his usefulness as an effective leader of that religion.'
- Labor's deputy leader Jenny Macklin thought 'this man needs to be condemned for his lack of moral leadership' and 'certainly should go'.

These calls are obviously an inappropriate interference by government officials into Muslim free association. Clearly, such calls for Hilali to be silenced or removed is a gross intervention into religious affairs which would not be tolerated were he the leader of a Christian church. Only New South Wales Community Relations Commission chairman Stepan Kerkyasharian seems to get it right when he said that 'the position of leadership is a matter for his constituency, but he owes the rest of Australia an apology.' (Admittedly however, the case of Hilali is complicated if claims are true that on other occasions, he has supported jihadist violence.)

But there are also another crucial issue in this case. Our community always fears that its differences will explode into open violence. Government and media try to contain the civil

unrest to which humans are so prone by urging restraint upon religious leaders, and by marginalising the ones they think don't care.

But silencing Hilali only drives underground the beliefs he represents. His explanatory statement emphasises that his comments were 'inappropriate and unacceptable for the Australian society and Western society in general', but he maintains their appropriateness within a Muslim context. Clearly then, his teachings have the support of some number of his Muslim constituency. (It was reported on Thursday 2/11 that some 50 imams came out in support, and many protesters had planned to do so but were discouraged by the Sheikh.)

No pious talk of pluralism, and no hopeful appeal to a silent majority of moderate Muslims, will make these ideas go away. To characterise Hilali as an extremist and to agitate for his sacking is only a short-term, stop-gap measure, because what is at stake here is fundamentally a *religious* battle of ideas about humanity.

Therefore Australian liberals need to participate in what they really can't handle: a serious religious discussion. What does Islam truly think about men and their relationships with women? Liberals do need to shut up, just for a moment, and *listen* as Muslims fight this out among themselves. If the conclusion is significantly different from what Christians have concluded, then just for once, liberalism will have to own Christianity as its wellspring, and state for the record that an Australian liberal democracy is committed to this Christian view of things.

Men like Hilali leave us unpersuaded for reasons that need to be unearthed and rediscovered, or else our views degenerate into mere taboo systems. Simply silencing him offers nothing toward this rediscovery, and is the worst possible way to handle him and those who believe as he does.

*Andrew Cameron,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

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