

It's been a week of trauma and tragedy on many levels. One good news story stands out, though: [the life sentences passed on those](#) who attempted to murder the young pro-education activist Malala Yousafzai, barely a child at the time, in 2012.

Malala was shot in the head, and nearly died, but the power of modern medical science, and her own courage as a young woman who had faced down the Taliban in Pakistan's Swat Valley, enabled her to pull through. Now she uses the global media as a platform for advocacy on the rights of women in her country, and indeed everywhere men armed with guns and holy books strive to keep women out of school and in their place. She became the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2014, and continues to shine a light across a darkening globe.

Malala was a heretic, in the view of her attackers, for challenging their reading of the Qur'an. So too is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, [interviewed on ABC radio last week](#) about her new book of that name.

[Heretic: why Islam needs a reformation now](#)

calls for the religion into which she was born and raised in Somalia to make itself fit for modernity. Just as Christianity did centuries ago, what she calls 'Medina Islam' – the Islam of public beheadings, burnings alive, sharia law and so on, must be rejected by Muslims if they are to share the world in peace with the rest of us.

As a young woman who fled her country to escape genital mutilation and theocratic oppression, and who then emerged as an eloquent spokesperson for reason in matters of religion, she has long been on the jihadi death list, and will probably require police protection for the rest of her life. She, like Malala, displays every day a courage most of us will never have to muster.

I remember well watching the TV news the day in 2004 when her creative partner, Theo Van Gogh, was murdered in Amsterdam by a 'lone wolf' Islamic extremist – we didn't use that term then, but Van Gogh's attempted decapitation in full public view was a foretaste of things to come. He had made a critical, heretical film, with Ali, about the place of women in Islam.

What dismayed me about this incident - apart from the horrific death of another human being - was the ambivalent response of many who would normally describe themselves as liberal in relation to freedom of speech and thought.

Heretics

Written by The Conversation

Van Gogh, like his countryman politician Pym Fortuyn, also murdered for his views on Islam, were portrayed in much media coverage as if they had brought this punishment down upon themselves, merely by raising the issue of religious values and how they relate to democratic polities. They were seen in some liberal circles as right-wing extremists, though both were closer to what I would call left libertarianism in their views. Fortuyn was an openly gay parliamentarian, for example, and by no means the quasi-fascist depicted in some media at the time of his assassination.

As for Ali, the dread terms 'islamophobe' and 'neo-liberal' have often been used to describe her world view. Her subsequent relationship with the free market thinker Niall Ferguson is seen by some as rendering her unfit to speak out on the religion she knows so well. To this extent she challenges not only the warriors of global jihad, but that strand of paternalistic liberalism which prefers not to offend religious extremism rather than to interrogate it in the way we do any other social movements which oppress women, or homosexuality, or ideological deviation.

Heretics can be secular too, as we saw last week in the debate around UWA's partnership with the self-proclaimed 'skeptical environmentalist', Bjorn Lomborg.

Once pigeon-holed as a 'climate denialist' in many quarters, and a 'luke warmist' in [the Conversation by Clive Hamilton](#)

(as if this was a self-evident flaw), Lomborg's offence has been to question, not the reality of anthropogenic global warming, but the appropriate global policy response.

Lomborg's argument is easily stated, and surprisingly coherent given the hysterical media coverage he often receives.

Faced with predictions of global warming of between 1-4 degrees Celsius in this century, and with most of the damage impacting on the developing world, is it better to spend trillions of dollars shaving 1 or 2 percent off that figure, or spending equivalent amounts on investment in technologies which reduce the developing world's dependence on fossil fuels, and increase global energy efficiency, at the same time as bolstering our defences against increased sea levels and other likely effects of temperature change?

The West, many would accept, talks a good game on international aid and assistance, and for a

time there back in the days of Bono and Gordon Brown and the [Global Call To End Poverty](#) , there was a sense of real change in the air. But the sums we and our governments donate to economic aid in developing countries are paltry compared, say, to the cost of the 2008 credit crunch bailouts, or the sums avoided in tax by global corporations. Paltry, too, compared to what the international community of nations spends on weapons and militaries. So there's a lot of hypocrisy and cant around the debate about climate change.

Lomborg draws our attention to this and says, why not redirect at least some of the monies we spend globally on making a decimal point of difference here and there to global warming predictions, towards practical quality-of-life improving solutions for the billions of people who care less about two degrees of warming fifty years from now, than clean water and electricity for them and their children in their shanty towns and villages now.

Maybe, Lomborg suggests (and I paraphrase), radically raising the living standards of those communities would make them more amenable to the need to address climate change, and more able to contribute to the environmental policy challenge than is possible when life is a daily struggle for the bare necessities of subsistence.

Put like that, Lomborg's approach to the climate change issue seems at least reasonable, rather than grounds for angry protests at UWA. Although he is not under threat of death, he too is perceived by far too many otherwise thoughtful people as a heretic, to be shouted down and burnt at the stake of public opinion.

I'm not endorsing all he has said or written, particularly when he was a young academic seeking to make a name for himself, but as someone who cares passionately about the environment, and accepts without reservation the reality of anthropogenic global warming, I really can't see the harm in letting him do some of his research in Australia.

In her ABC interview with Aayan Hirst Ali, Fran Kelly said something to the effect that reformations always require heretics to come forward, and sometimes to give their lives. To help prevent that outcome for Ali and Malala and those like them, we should loudly declare our support, if not always for what they say, then at least, and without reservation, their right to say it.

Disclosure

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