



Let the idiot speak: Marni Soupcoff on the case for Terry Jones

Marni Soupcoff | Oct 10, 2012

Apparently the Conservatives are unfamiliar with the adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” The government is trying to pass a law that would allow the immigration minister the broad discretion to keep any individual out of Canada based on “public policy considerations.”

That would include Terry Jones, the infamous Koran-burning Florida pastor who is scheduled to speak in Toronto Thursday. Even without the sweeping new government powers, though, there is no guarantee Jones will make it across the border for the scheduled debate on *The Innocence of Muslims*, the anti-Islamic video that caused such a violent furor in Muslim countries in September. Border agents could turn Jones away if they consider him a security threat.

As far as I’m concerned, we’ll all be better off if Jones is permitted to enter the country and give his offensive rant about Islam being incompatible with Western society: He is not threatening any violence or lawbreaking, he’s merely proposing to espouse a message the government (and I daresay most Canadian people) find repellent. No one will be compelled to listen to him when he’s here. Those that do may actually come away with less respect for him than they would have otherwise possessed — certainly less than if he’s made into a martyr by being banned from Canada for his thoughts. If we start treating disagreeable ideas as reasons for denying visitors entry into this country, we will be making no progress in dealing with these swathes of thinking (censoring problematic arguments is not the best way to counter them), and we will be ceding the power to categorize which thinking is okay — and which isn’t — to the government. Apologies, Jason Kenney, but as much as I admire you, I’m not ready to hand over that kind of authority. Just imagine how easily such decisions could be perverted by political considerations.

And so the decision to let Jones into the country to deliver his intentionally provocative message would be a sensible one.

An argument against letting Jones onto Canadian soil is that violence will ensue — not that Jones himself will do any physical harm, but rather that Muslims will take such offense at his remarks that they will commit violent, even deadly, attacks on the nearest Westerners or Christians, or will end up harming themselves in out-of-control protests. Muslims in Canada also might feel driven to violence to express their outrage, the thinking goes.

It's true that it's happened elsewhere, both in response to Jones and in response to the *The Innocence of Muslims* (and any number of other religious slights or perceived religious slights). But 1) I think it does Canadian Muslims a disservice to suggest, without any evidence, that they too could so easily be roused to murder and destruction; and 2) it's odd that it is Jones who we are seeking to punish for these acts, rather than those who actually committed them. As Doug Bandow put it in a Forbes magazine article about Jones last year, "What is the more basic problem? That a jerk is willing to offend others? Or that extremists are willing to kill, wound and destroy in response?"

"Words have unprecedented power in the age of the Internet," Jonathan Kay argues in his post in favour of banning Jones from Canada. He's right, but it's a fact that underscores the particular futility of trying to shut down speech today by circumscribing an individual's travel plans.

You're not going to be able to shut Jones up by turning him back at the border. His ideas and messages will be spread by YouTube regardless of his physical location. And if you're counting on the crazed mobs in the Muslim world who are out for Western blood to make a distinction between backpackers with maple leafs on their rucksacks and those without, then good luck to you. We're not getting out of this mess that easily, I'm afraid — despite our half-hearted defenses of free speech, Canada is going to be mushed in with the other Western powers, regardless of whether we spinelessly bar a spotlight-seeking Florida bigot from our country or not.

All of this comes down to the kind of world we'd like to live in: one where religion can be criticized without fear of violent and legal reprisals, or one where it can't.

If it's the former option we're going for, then let Terry Jones into Canada. And be proud of the enlightened tradition this decision represents.