

Angles of Tolerance: Yusuf Islam in Christchurch

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Let's not be too churlish about this; but then again, let us not be ignorant. The singer once known as Cat Stevens (in pre-conversion state), and known as Yusuf Islam to others, made a considerable impression on the stage in Christchurch. The slaughter of fifty at two mosques in the New Zealand city had made enough of an impression to lure the singer.

Yusuf had worshipped at the Masjid Al Noor in December 2017, a pit stop as part of his 50th anniversary Peace Train tour. On Friday, he performed at the National Remembrance Service in Hagley Park. Assisted by double-bassist Bruce Lynch, he wowed the crowd. To various New Zealand press outlets, he was in a mood [to reflect](#), recalling a city “peaceful” and “orderly” with “nice people”. Then came the trigger happy “monster”. The response to the killings impressed him. There was “this incredible backlash of kindness and love and unity which is obviously so powerful that it changes the whole picture from dark to light.”

The Ardern government had furnished him an exemplary case of emotional management and response. They had shone the light.

“Things like [the reaction] don’t happen in many other places in the world. Things happen but it stays dark. The government rarely does anything of any importance in the aftermath. Here the story is different.”

He reflected on ignorance being the enemy; freedom of speech was to be valued “but truth, peace and harmony are kind of more valuable.”

Tolerance, inclusiveness, love. These words are often bandied about as part of a stage set but not always practiced. Yusuf Islam supplies us a troubling example, and his dig at freedom of speech as being of secondary order of importance is important. His selection as part of the mourning and commemoration process might have been an oversight on the part of the organisers; if so, it was a grave one, suggesting that ignorance and grief are often two parts of the same distorting lenses.

In 1989, on British television, the singer was [posed](#) a hypothetical by international lawyer and pundit Geoffrey Robertson QC. A state sanctioned edict, or fatwa, had been issued by Iran’s supreme leader the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*. All Muslims were to be encouraged in the endeavour; publishers were also to be targets. Even a novel, with an exploratory theme suggesting that the Prophet Mohammed might have stemmed from pagan tradition, was too much to stomach. Rushdie was intentionally naughty, deploying terms long seen as taboo: Jahilia, alluding to Jahiliyyah, or “state of ignorance from guidance of God”; a brothel named Hijab; and Mahound, a pejorative variant of Mohammed.

Did Rushdie deserve to die? “Yes, yes,” came the unequivocal response from Yusuf. Would you be his executioner? “Uh, no, not necessarily, unless we were in an Islamic state and I was ordered by a judge or by the authority to carry out such an act – perhaps yes.” Would you attend an effigy-burning protest against the author? “I would have hoped that it’d be the real thing.” Should Rushdie turn up at his doorstep, he “might ring somebody who might do more damage to him than he would like. I’d try to phone the Ayatollah Khomeini and tell him exactly where this man is.”

Hard to forget, and Rushdie would grimly [muse](#) in 2010 on the appearance of Yusuf at Jon Stewart’s Rally for Sanity. “I have always liked Stewart and Colbert but what on earth was Cat Yusuf Stevens Islam doing on that stage? If he’s a ‘good Muslim’ like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar then I’m the Great Pumpkin. Happy Halloween.”

People can mellow, and, with age, even shift their positions. Defects can be revised; mistakes revisited. Andrew Anthony of the *Observer* failed to [note](#) much in the way of change a decade or so after the singer expressed his faithful bloodlust. “He told me in 1997, eight years after saying on TV that Rushdie should be lynched, that he was in favour of stoning women to death for adultery. He also reconfirmed his position on Rushdie.”

Yusuf had also dedicated himself to that unhealthy tendency latent in many monotheistic religions: proselytization. The Islamia school in Brent, Anthony notes, was dedicated to “bring about the submission of the individual, the community and the world at large to Islam.” Women were also to abide by their fair share of subjugation and heed submission in the enterprise. Such is the way of that type of tolerance.

In 2017 on News24, Yusuf [continued](#) what has been a systematic process of aversion and denial. (The faithful fanatic can wobble when needed.) “I never called for the death of Salman Rushdie; nor backed the Fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini – and still don’t.” Instead, he was happy to blame Rushdie, a sure sign about where guilt should lie. “The book [*The Satanic Verses*] itself destroyed the harmony between peoples and created an unnecessary international crisis.”

The Robertson episode is ignored; instead, Yusuf finds fault with “a loaded question posed by a journalist, after a harmless biographical lecture I gave to students in Kingston University in 1989”. The tendency to erase in the name of faith is all too evident here.

The lasting truth about those solemn, and for the most part heartfelt proceedings in Hagley Park, is that they were marked by a person who has little in the way of any problem with theocratic-sanctioned murder for the use of language. By an author, a wordsmith, a thinker. For an occasion supposedly staged to rebuke extremism, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern effectively shared the same stage with one of the more extreme creatures of fanaticism, one who embraces assassination as one of the more effective means of censorship. As Rushdie himself would pen in a [letter](#) to the *Telegraph* in 2007, “Let’s have no more rubbish about how ‘green’ and innocent this man was.”

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