

Dossier | Rational and Irrational Fears in the Age of Religious Fundamentalisms

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Rational and Irrational Fears in the Age of Religious Fundamentalisms

By Lanfranco Aceti

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

Only I will remain.

– Frank Herbert (1)

The fear of being blacklisted for expressing anti-clerical sentiments is the first in a long list. And then there is the fear of being violently attacked and killed by fanatics belonging to religious groups that are looking to the censorship of the arts as a tool to destroy the cultural identity of a secular and multicultural society. To that what needs to be added is the fear of being attacked by the multicultural sanctimonious fascists, who are no less dangerous than any other fundamentalists spun from intolerant ideologies or faiths. There are the fears of e-attacks, which are not less vicious than real attacks. Then there is the fear of upsetting curators, sponsors, academics, publishers, friends and family. There is the fear for one's personal safety and for those who share a close bond based on working relationship or on family ties.

After all these fears have been dealt with, then there may be the possibility of finding a space within which to construct and place an artwork.

But then other fears come to light. Is the artwork too cowardly, bending to the pressures of censorship? Have the ethical and artistic processes been compromised by the imposed negotiation processes needed to respect the sensitivities of intolerant religious communities that do not uphold freedom of speech and freedom of thinking in the process of creating visual imageries and artworks that reflect the conflicts of contemporary society? Is the genuflected servitude to a failing and divisive multicultural ideology a compromised statement of art not exercising social critique? Is it enough to hide within a process of critique that is stripped by any social or clerical element in order to drive in a disconcerting message of fear, unsettlement, censorship and self-censorship that is devouring both the artistic production and the artist's identity based on principles of secular freedoms?

As an artist and academic operating in London who is interested in the conflicts of globalisation and local communities my answer to all of these questions, doubts and fears is just one: silence.

But this is a silence made of complex issues, of artworks that never happened. It is a silence that is formed by a series of screams that historically and at present have been raised against the historical revisionism to reframe the role that the violent applications of religious tenets have played and still play in our societies.

The focus of this article is on the issue of religious violence and censorship and their relationship to artistic expressions. The twenty-first century has brought back the fear of religious fanaticism, which is eroding the secular and peaceful structures of contemporary society, within which minority groups are attempting to engineer a new understanding of diversity and artistic cultural practices as expressions of acceptance of differences beyond race, religion and gender. This secular globalisation process was providing hope for a new peaceful, globalized and socially integrated generation beyond the barriers of cultural particularisms.

London, as a traditional crucible of diverse religious groups and ideologies, is the territory of this personal artistic exploration into the nature of current debates on artistic censorship by religious groups. How then do secular artists perceive faith and revelation in this context?

The secular rational and irrational fear of religion is not based on an ostracism of this or that creed, but on the impossibility of a dialogue between non-believers on one side and the faithful and fanatics on the other. The latter, particularly, blinded by the light of god, are bound to the religious tenets and deaf to the law and reasons of men. The fear is that the contemporary confrontation between faithful and secularists may become a self-fulfilling prophecy through the instrument of fear, which will radicalize both the secular state (or what remains of it) and the religious counterparts.

The British approach, by generating a basic confusion between religion and race, has created a minefield whereby criticism of religion is criticism of race. The freedom of artistic expression has become the first victim of this new construct which has created a society where art is censored and self-censored. In British society assuaging fundamentalist religious groups in order to avoid violent retaliations appears to be a policy that, since the Salman Rushdie case, has become increasingly widespread. The differences in the knighthood of Iqbal Sacranie and the recent reactions to Salman Rushdie's knighthood are the most recent examples of a series of misjudged arguments used to justify a retreat from the defence of democratic values.

Here other fears arise: that the strength of western democracies is weakening and that conservative religious groups are exploiting this weakness by eroding the peaceful rules of engagement in the public space. The fear is that the growth of religious fanaticism will

create fanatical and extremist groups within each religion that sooner or later, once having dealt with the secular society, will start confronting each other on the supremacy of their gods.

The idea that a gym next to a synagogue in Montreal needed to be screened because it offended worshippers, their children in particular, is as ridiculous as the idea of screening the synagogue and its worshippers because it offended anyone's secular sensitivities. What then about jogging around the synagogue in skimpy lycra running clothes. Would that be an offence too? Would it then be possible to have a flash mob art event with people in their lycra gym gear running up and down the streets surrounding the synagogue? The real question is why defenders of democratic rights and the people using the gym have not walked in their "obscene attires" in a warming-up lap around the synagogue before starting their training? A few minutes run to increase both fitness and democracy. Although a petition initiated by Renée Lavaillante has brought back the clear windows with blinds to the gym, these religious forms of disconnected and confrontational social participation raise the fear of a lack of democratic engagement and reciprocal respect of rights between social groups.

The problem is then why art is being censored and why it has been the first element of secular democracies to come under attack? Art represents collective visual identities and by attacking the arts, both literary and visual arts, by restraining their freedoms, what is under attack are the basic freedoms and liberties that have been conquered with innumerable deaths and sacrifices throughout history to free men and women from the moral impositions of religious tenets.

The censorship of John Latham at Tate Britain is just one of a long series of acts of censorship that have plagued British society since the 1989 attack on Salman Rushdie and that have been excused with the intention of not upsetting the public order. This approach is revealing of a cowardice that I fear has been penetrating into the system and, now that it has been established, is eroding basic rights, freedoms and more importantly both individual and collective aesthetic consciousness. It is a cautionary approach that sounds unreasonable even to more radical religious groups.

"I don't know what precise thought processes were going on at the Tate but I am concerned about the signal this sends at a time when we see free speech quite significantly under threat. I think that after 7 July 2005 we need this kind of artistic expression and political expression and discourse and disagreement more than ever, which is why this is worrying. Is three holy books in a piece of glass going to incite controversy?" (2)

When artists try to criticize and challenge any form of religious beliefs through their artistic practice, the result is a cowardly silence of polite refusals and expressions of horror by curators, gallery owners, publishers, editors and academics.

There is the fear that, like Cassandra, people who are arguing for a different and more peaceful society are being shunned when presenting the case for a different and new interpretation of the concept of culture that must be embedded in the respect of fundamental human rights, like the right to life, absolutely and independently from the restrictions of creeds and cultures.

But the major fear is that, squeezed between fascist applications of religious revelations, multicultural dogmas and the urge to give up freedoms in order to let an increasingly militarized state exercise control over fanatics, there is little room left for platforms of engagement, respectful dialogue and sensible discussions. There is also the fear that the cultural ruptures are becoming total, generating a discourse of us and them, faithful and secular, west and east, fascist fanatics and multicultural fanatics. There is the ulterior fear that in this context there is a hidden strategy to erode the secular space and that, once the secularists and the more moderate and reasonable groups will be silenced and defeated, a bloody battle will ensue between religions in order to control what was once perhaps a peaceful and secular public space. The final fear is that there is an impossibility to discuss these issues freely in the arts as in any other field and that secular and democratic freedoms have already been eroded.

And if all the fears listed in this article are irrational, then there is the fear that a propaganda machine has already hijacked reality for a simulacral representation of a conflict that is taking root and becoming a real self-fulfilling prophecy.

My fear is of these religious and political fanatics, of any religious and political kind, waiting for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth or the perfect utopia and having done such a good job with their souls and ideologies, that now feel the need to save everyone else by force, violence and murder (this is an historical tradition common to all religious and political fanatics).

There is the irrational fear that the spectre of forced religious morality, beliefs and behaviours not to render the state morally impure will come back into force. There is the fear that behaviours will be condemned and that the democratic path of society will be torn apart by violently enforced religious moralities. Another fear is that finding peaceful ways of subverting the messages of violence, confrontation and hatred becomes increasingly difficult in a society where the participation in the defence of democratic life and ideals appears to wane. Hence the question: what is the role of the artist in all of this? Is the role of the artist just that of documenting? And what has the artist the onus to document: the process of censorship and self-censorship?

My fear is that I will not have anyone or any other rewards waiting for me in the Kingdom of Heaven. My fear is that all gods are not multicultural and actually discriminate and are racist as much and perhaps more than their representatives on earth.

A strong fear raises its head, a fear of ridicule and sarcasm, a fear that would impinge not on me but on all of these priests, pious and religious men ready to kill for their respective creeds and morally violent in the name of god. What if they had to pay a price to share in the light of god? What if god was a homosexual too?

And yes, I fear I should not have written this article. But fear is gone together with god, and I am still here.

NOTES

1. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 8.
2. David Smith, "Artist Hits at Tate 'Cowards' over Ban: Fears of Religious Extremists Spur Gallery to Shelve Sculpture of Koran Embedded in Glass," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2005 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,11711,1577890,00.html> (accessed July 20, 2007).