

THE AUSTRALIAN

ABC blames France when jihadis murder its innocents

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12:00AM NOVEMBER 20, 2020

Since the brutal assassination of French schoolteacher Samuel Paty, who was beheaded on the street by an Islamist for showing his students a caricature of the Prophet Mohammed, the ABC has distinguished itself by publishing one piece after the other that pins the blame for the French terrorist attacks not on the fanatics and their murderous ideology but — you guessed it — on France.

The ABC's own news analysis, issued some two weeks after Paty's murder, set the pace. Although presented as coolly factual, more than two-thirds of the piece was taken up with criticisms of Charlie Hebdo's caricatures. Adding to the bias, the only expert interviewed for that piece — a long-time critic of the caricatures — was allowed to get away with claims that are frankly astonishing.

According to that hand-picked expert, there is a stark contrast between France, which defended Charlie Hebdo's right to publish the caricatures as falling within the country's constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression, and the "responsible" approach adopted by "other European nations".

But almost all of those countries treated the caricatures exactly as France has; and far from affecting France alone, Islamist protests about caricatures of the prophet have, targeted Denmark, The Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, among many others.

Those comments, however, were just an hors d'oeuvre for an opinion piece by [Myriam Francois](#), a UK-based convert to Islam who specialises in denouncing what she views as Islamophobia, and a [follow-up article issued on Monday](#) by Deakin University's Fethi Mansouri and Greg Barton.

Merely to list the grievous errors in those pieces, which were not balanced by better informed points of view, would require far more space than is available. But the essence of their argument is straightforward.

In Mansouri and Barton's words, France's laws on secularism "marginalise" and "chastise" the country's "religious minorities", including its Muslims, while providing "significant support" to the country's majority Catholic faith.

Viewed in historical perspective, that contention is laughable. Although Mansouri and Barton show little sign of having read them, the landmark statutes adopted in 1881-83, 1886, 1901 and 1905 were designed to, and did, eliminate the Catholic Church's role in public decision-making, weakening the church dramatically.

Nor is there any evidence that the laws generally "marginalised" and "chastised" religious minorities, as Mansouri and Barton contend; on the contrary, thanks partly to their protections, Protestants and Jews thrived in France after the Second World War, rising to prominence in every sphere of public life, much as France's Vietnamese community is doing.

It is true that the picture for Muslims, although not uniformly bleak, is grimmer. But that is hardly the fault of the secularism laws, which, as well as safeguarding the freedom to practise Islam, have been implemented neutrally, with the Council of State — the country's powerful administrative court — rejecting any measures which discriminate against particular faiths.

For example, a suite of laws adopted in the 1880s effectively prohibited "ostentatious" signs of religion in the public sector, forcing the removal, on a massive scale, of crucifixes and other - Catholic icons from all state schools and offices.

It was in the spirit of those prohibitions that the wearing of hijabs by Muslim students and of skullcaps by Jewish students in state schools was addressed (rightly or wrongly) in the law of

March 15, 2004.

In fact, if that law, which extended the prohibition on “ostentatious” symbols to hijabs and skullcaps, was subsequently upheld by the European Court of Human Rights, it was primarily because it applied to all faiths on a neutral basis.

Mansouri and Barton then compound their error by claiming that Catholic schools in France - receive greater support than those of other denominations. On the contrary, the law of - December 31, 1959 provides exactly the same (very generous) level of financial assistance to all independent schools that agree to meet the standards set down in the national curriculum, regardless of their affiliation.

Schools which refuse to teach subjects such as sexual education and evolutionary biology, as some Islamic schools choose to do, receive less public funding — but so do all non-Islamic schools which make the same choices.

Indeed, rather than arising from the principle of neutrality, many French analysts believe France’s problems with Islamism have been aggravated by the myriad derogations from that principle which have, however inadvertently, favoured the Islamists in recent years.

Over the past three decades, for example, administrative rulings have made it easier for low-- income Islamic communities to build mosques by allowing local councils and other public bodies to contribute to their financing.

At the same time, so as to ensure the availability of trained imams, France has facilitated their education in, and recruitment from, the Islamic world, including through state-to-state agreements.

But instead of strengthening social cohesion, as they were intended to do, those measures have encouraged the proliferation of centres preaching radical Islam, with foreign imams who were trained in fundamentalist madrassas actively promoting jihadism.

Similarly, although few public resources are devoted to consulting with other religious groups, since 1989 — when Pierre Joxe, the then minister of the interior, set up an official Islamic

advisory council — governments from both sides of politics have made a sustained investment in establishing national and regional bodies to represent France's Muslims.

To claim, as Myriam Francois does, that France's Muslims are "rarely, if ever, consulted" on the policies that affect them is consequently absurd. What can be said, however, is that those efforts at consultation have largely backfired, creating additional platforms for the Islamists to capture and exploit.

There is nonetheless one assertion of Mansouri and Barton's that rings true: France does indeed "ask migrants to simply adopt and adapt to the republican values and work towards becoming French citizens", rather than remaining trapped in "hyphenated identities".

But despite the howls of outrage it provokes from Francois, Mansouri and Barton, that goal scarcely seems illegitimate. After all, while migrants bring to their new home their individual pasts, forging a common future requires a commitment to shared values and to the undivided obligations of equal citizenship. And the stronger, deeper and more genuine the common bonds of citizenship are, the greater will be the individual differences the polity can tolerate without tearing itself apart. Liberty and loyalty are therefore not alternatives but inseparable companions.

How those bonds of citizenship should be formed and tested is, no doubt, open to debate. Yet this much is clear: advancing that debate by providing a balanced and accurate discussion is not on the ABC's agenda.

Writing in this newspaper on Tuesday, [ABC board member Joseph Gersh argued](#) that today's "era of fake news" has made the ABC's role more important than ever.

It certainly has — as a purveyor, at taxpayers' expense, of the fake news he so loudly decries.