



Nick Cohen

The awful squeal of fundamentalism

Authoritarians seeking to extend repression have always drawn innocents into manufactured crises. None was more innocent than Jacques Barrot, who, in 2005, helped trigger a wave of death when he entered France's annual pig squealing contest at the Pyrenean village of Trie-sur-Baïse.

Barrot didn't win: that honour went to Yohann and Olivier Roussel for delivering an impressive impersonation of pigs mating. However, history remembers Barrot rather than the Roussels because an Associated Press photographer snapped him wearing a plastic snout standing at the microphone and put it on the news wires.

The next time it appeared, someone had doctored the picture and added the caption: 'Here is the real image of Mohammed.' Two radical imams, whom Denmark had foolishly welcomed as asylum seekers, included it in a dossier they were hawking round the dictatorships of the Middle East, on how Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* had insulted Muslims.

After at least 100 deaths and the storming of Danish embassies in Syria and Iran, journalists pointed out that the newspaper hadn't included a picture of M Barrot among the innocuous cartoons it had run to uphold the right to mock religion. The clerics then said an anonymous poison pen writer had sent the wounding picture to a Danish Muslim. It was, they added, an insult to their faith as great as Ayaan Hirsi Ali's championing of the rights of Muslim women.

Too many people forgot too quickly that the violence of 2005 did not have as its 'root cause' the decision of a small Danish newspaper to satirise the godly,



Jacques Barrot at the annual pig squealing contest in Trie-sur-Baïse in France. It was a doctored version of this picture that allegedly led to at least 100 deaths. Bob Edme/AP

For three months after *Jyllands-Posten* published, there was no rage from the 'Arab street' or any other street. Only after lobbying from the imams and sly political calculation from the powerful did the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) unleash the protests by demanding that the UN impose sanctions on Denmark. Like the Reichstag fire and Sergei Kirov's assassination, the cartoons controversy most suited those who affected to be most outraged.

The mayhem continues. Last month, Danish police arrested suspects allegedly planning to attack a cartoonist.

The government seeks to deny us the very language needed to describe religious terror

Danish papers reprinted the cartoons as a gesture of solidarity. (As no British editor has had the nerve to run them, I should say nearly every issue of *Private Eye* has more 'provocative' jokes about Christianity.) The Sudanese government threatened to expel Danish aid workers in retaliation. Sudan is one of the largest recipients of aid from Denmark. If that stops, more will die.

In language filled with the optimism of the struggles against 20th-century totalitarianism, Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

But faced with a conflict between high principle and a reactionary stunt, the UN Secretary General chose the side of the

hysterics. A spokeswoman for Ban Ki-moon said that he thought that the new cartoon controversy showed that 'freedom of expression should be exercised responsibly and in a way that respects all religious beliefs'.

All religious beliefs, that is. Even if they do not respect each other. Even if by the normal standards of intellectual life, they make no sense. Even if the behaviour of their followers does not inspire respect, but fear.

If the UN were to order us to 'respect all political beliefs', conservatives would say they weren't prepared to respect communists, leftists would say they weren't prepared to respect fascists and everyone else would burst out laughing. Yet the UN Human Rights Council is proposing in all seriousness to protect religion by doctoring its universal defence of freedom of expression.

The OIC is pushing it to approve a super-blasphemy law that would make it an offence to 'defame' any religion. Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said attending the discussions was an Orwellian experience, with speakers using the language of liberalism to justify oppression. 'Anyone seeking to draw attention to the capital offence of apostasy in Islamic countries will be lucky to be heard,' he reported. 'Anything deemed the slightest bit critical of Islam is immediately jumped upon.'

To the bafflement of outsiders, communist China and Cuba have joined the states of the Islamic conference. Both are officially atheist and China persecutes its Muslim minority. But what unites dictatorships is more important than what divides them and no one should be sur-

prised that communist elites will use any weapon available to assault principles which threaten their power.

Sitting in Britain, it is easy to feel superior. We can dismiss the UN as a club without rules that negates its own standards by granting membership to countries that break every article in the declaration of human rights.

You need only look around to realise that complacency is unwarranted. Last week, Channel 4 launched a libel action against West Midlands Police and the Crown Prosecution Service, which had accused its film-makers of inventing all-too-real scenes of clerics preaching misogyny, anti-semitism and homophobia. They must have found accurate investigative reporting disrespectful. The government seeks to deny us the very language we need to describe religious terror and insists civil servants don't call Islamic extremists Islamic extremists but 'anti-Islamic extremists'.

He isn't alone in succumbing to obfuscation and appeasement. The past five years have been among the most shameful in BBC history. It presents tiny groups of extreme right wingers as the authentic voice of Islam while shunning liberal-minded Muslims or asking hard questions of those who would oppress them.

Meanwhile, it is not only authoritarian states at the UN which want a universal blasphemy law. The Archbishop of Canterbury is as keen on criminalising criticism.

AP reported that Yohann and Olivier Roussel triumphed after unleashing a 'cacophony of oinks and grunts'. Why go to Trie-sur-Baïse when you can hear them at home?