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Nasty, brutish, but tolerant

On “Why can’t we all just get along?”

On the cover of *The Spectator* for 17 February is an arresting photograph of a woman staring—worriedly, we think—out of that little headdress slit that traditionalist Muslims regard as the only seemly point of female contact with the world at large. The image illustrates “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along?,” an essay by the political philosopher—according to *The Spectator*, “Britain’s foremost political philosopher”—John Gray. We have had occasion to comment on John Gray in this space before. Whether he is Britain’s “foremost political philosopher” is something that might give pause to Kenneth Minogue, Roger Scruton, and quite a few other contenders for that title. But Mr. Gray is indisputably among Britain’s wooliest, most platitudinous political philosophers. He made his reputation a couple of decades ago as a maverick (i.e., inconsistent) conservative, pontificating in the wake of Margaret Thatcher. He has been at pains in the years since to distance himself from anything recognizably conservative while cultivating a talent for gaseous, high-minded equivocation. His latest performance in *The Spectator* is a jewel of the genre.

It is entirely fitting that the editors of *The Spectator* reached out to Rodney King for their title. Mr. King sped through red lights while high on PCP, resisted arrest, and then, after riots broke out, wondered “Why can’t we all just get along?” Mr. Gray thinks when it comes to Islam, Britain ought to forget about demanding any “consensus on values” and instead embrace a multicultural tolerance. “Pressing Muslims to integrate,” he writes, “may actually make the struggle against terrorism more difficult.” Well, sure: it “may.” Wholesale possibility is always cheap, not to say vacuous. But insisting that immigrant populations assimilate may also foster social comity, good manners, and a more manageable civil society—and here when we say “may” we have the warrant of longstanding tradition and experience.

Mr. Gray seems to think that, because other groups have committed terrorist acts, “it is nonsense to suggest that suicide bombing reflects an Islamic culture of martyrdom.” Let’s see: today’s news stories include items about a suicide bomber in Baghdad who killed himself and eight others at a funeral, another suicide bomber who killed eleven in Najaf, not to mention the “would-be Palestinian suicide bomber” detained by the Egyptian police as he crossed the Gaza Strip and

another chap, disguised as a doctor, who blew himself up at the opening of a hospital ward in Afghanistan. And that's just for starters. If such things do not "reflect" "an Islamic culture of martyrdom," they will do until the real thing comes along.

Mr. Gray wants us to give up the search for "consensus" on "fundamental values" and "relearn" instead "the habit of tolerance." To support this desideratum he appeals to the philosophy of—you may wish to sit down before reading this—Thomas Hobbes. "It might," Mr. Gray allows, "sound odd to describe Thomas Hobbes as a liberal" who, in Mr. Gray's rendition, is indistinguishable from John Stuart Mill. Well, yes: it sounds odd because it is *very* odd indeed to appeal to England's most famous champion of absolutism as a "liberal" who wants us to elevate tolerance as the primary political virtue.

Mr. Gray is certainly right that "achieving a modus vivendi with Islam is not going to be easy." The question is whether we are more likely to achieve it by the moral capitulation inherent in the tolerance prescribed by multiculturalism or whether, on the contrary, such tolerance is tantamount to cultural suicide. Tolerance is a dandy virtue—so long as it unfolds in a culture in which there is a "consensus" on "fundamental values," including the value of tolerance. Absent that consensus, tolerance quickly degenerates into an enemy of freedom. "There is," G. K. Chesterton wrote, "a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped." How much more wisdom there is in that observation than in John Gray's Rodney King philosophy.

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