

# The New Criterion

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## Misogyny as multiculturalism

by Michael Weiss

"I accept that this may seem an odd thing to wish for," writes Nick Cohen in the latest issue of *Standpoint*, somewhat inverting his own lede, "but what the world needs now is an uncompromisingly militant feminist movement." The feminism Cohen has in mind calls for a single law to which all citizens, whatever their religious or ethnic grouping, must adhere. It roundly forbids murdering a woman for being raped or lashing her for being seen in the company of a married man. This would have been an elementary component of any "wave" of feminism in decades past, but today, alas, it's a radical proposition.

The occasion for Cohen's vigorously argued polemic is the nasty reaction Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom's new book, *Does God Hate Women?*, received in the liberal British press. Though Cohen doesn't explicitly say so, his point is clear: had the authors confined themselves to thundering against the male-oriented perfidies of the Judeo-Christian tradition, they'd have likely been left alone, or praised for their contribution to the conventional wisdom. Any schoolboy can mouth a few platitudes about patriarchy, glass ceilings and the contemporary uses of the word "bitch." Should the root of this ancient problem be discovered in either Testament, well, that schoolboy will have probably discovered it without ever reading the relevant texts. Such is the nature of opinions in the age of open-mindedness.

But how dare two white-skinned Western atheists presume to condemn the Prophet Muhammed for keeping a 9 year-old bride and a slave-girl concubine, and how dare they insist that the God of Islam is a "God of playground bullies, a God of rapists, of gangs, of pimps"? Don't they know, reply their critics, no doubt looking over their shoulders for incinerated embassies and imminent loudmouthed "rage boys," that investigating the history of the fastest-growing monotheism can get you killed? Don't they know that it can get us *all* killed? Here's Cohen:

The response of the *Sunday Times* to *Does God Hate Women?* was truly sinister. "An academic book about religious attitudes to women is to be

published this week," the paper reported, "despite concerns it could cause a backlash among Muslims because it criticises the prophet Muhammad for taking a nine-year-old girl as his third wife. Such assertions could invoke the ire of some Muslims."

No irate Muslim had contacted the reporter to warn of a "backlash". She had not seen threats against Benson and Stangroom in online chatrooms. The *Sunday Times* invented a scandal where none existed and was unconcerned that it might provoke attacks on the authors. In a dismal sign of our nervous times, their panicked publisher responded by calling in an "ecumenical adviser" to assess whether the book's launch should go ahead. This is the first capitulation to theocracy on secular shores. Cowardice gets dressed up as liberalism in this copy-and-paste mess to pacify semi-literate Islamophobes, to assess whether the author is willing to stand up to the world's independence of one's own mind is held in suspicion, if not thought to be lethal in itself. The author of that *Sunday Times*

squib likely doesn't think it's wrong or immoral to point out certain unpleasant facts about a religion; but her children might because the predominant ethos—from Yale University Press to the newsstands of Borders—has made it all but impossible for such facts to see the light of day.

Spinoza's signet ring read *Caute*—"Cautiously"—and, with rare exception, he never took to provoking a medieval mob for provocation's sake. Still, such self-restraint didn't prohibit the *marrano* genius of Amsterdam from publishing what he really thought about God, nature and democracy. Imagine a world without *The Ethics* and you have what every catchpenny bien-pensant hack nowadays would call I'm-okay-you're-okay bliss.

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