

# The New Criterion

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## Cat's out of the bag on Jon Stewart

by Michael Weiss

Jon Stewart is quite slippery with his public persona. Is he a silly-faced clown mocking the many absurdities of American politics, or is he an earnest and self-important pundit susceptible to all the same absurdities himself? Vote him as trustworthy as Walter Cronkite and he'll plead the former. Accuse of him of being a flippant purveyor of undergraduate humor and not quite fit to sit at the grownup table of broadcast journalism and he'll have Tucker Carlson sacked from CNN.

As far as I can tell, Stewart's best line to date was that he changed his name from Leibowitz because it sounded "too Hollywood." And that was uttered years ago. Then again, the specialist of the Catskills school of comedy thrives in self-effacement whereas Stewart's shtick tends towards lurking self-aggrandizement. Never have the radical winds of change so emanated from a whoopie cushion. Indeed, the bulk of his reputation rests on being able to channel a certain variety of bourgeois liberal enmity that tricks out rank partisanship as detached sarcasm. *Who us, ideological? No way, dude. We're pragmatists to a man!*

Yet as Stewart makes clear by his every off-camera action (and every other on-camera one), he's as hypocritical and spin-doctored as any thundering Beltway egomaniac he lampoons.

Would it be rude to guess at his decision to invite Cat Stevens, a.k.a. Yusuf Islam, to perform at last weekend's mass rally in implausibly denied partisanship at the National Mall? Who better than a Cypriot-British convert to Islam with multi-platinum records under his caftan to combat the vicious demonization of Muslims by the Tea Party and anti-mosque fanatics.

Except that Yusuf Islam is a right-wing fundamentalist who makes Sarah Palin look like Bella Abzug. Nothing is more of a ratings boost for that hebephrenic pseudo-historian Glenn Beck than exhibiting a medieval apologist for murder as a spokesperson for "sane" America.

And Stewart evidently knows as much because his acquaintance Salman Rushdie has just got off the phone with him. Nick Cohen at Standpoint reports via Rushdie: "I spoke to Jon Stewart about Yusuf Islam's appearance. He said he was sorry it upset me, but really, it was plain that he was fine with it. Depressing."

What on earth is Rushdie referring to here? This is Yusuf Islam speaking to Geoffrey Robertson in 1989:

Robertson: You don't think that this man deserves to die?

Y. Islam: Who, Salman Rushdie?

Robertson: Yes.

Y. Islam: Yes, yes.

Robertson: And do you have a duty to be his executioner?

Y. Islam: Uh, no, not necessarily, unless we were in an Islamic state and I was ordered by a judge or by the authority to carry out such an act - perhaps, yes.

[Some minutes later, Robertson on the subject of a protest where an effigy of the author is to be burned]

Robertson: Would you be part of that protest, Yusuf Islam, would you go to a demonstration where you knew that an effigy was going to be burned?

Y. Islam: I would have hoped that it'd be the real thing.

No trouble there. We were all a bit confused in the 80's, some of us waking up hoping for the assassination of foreign novelists who invented mentally ill blasphemers. Surely Islam's views -- and here I mean the man, not the religion -- have changed since those moody fatweh days. Er, um, not so much, as the Daily Show anchor might put it.

Here is Islam in an interview with another British journalist in 1997 on the matter of apostasy:

Yusuf's response to this situation is to call for a change in international law. He speaks euphemistically of Rushdie, ensuring that he never actually mentions his name nor that of *The Satanic Verses*, while making it obvious who and what he means.

When I point out that Rushdie has not contravened any laws of this country, Yusuf says: 'Yes, but you have extradition. And if the extradition request is there . . .' Presumably he means from Iran, a country not renowned for displaying the most stringent respect for international law. He compares the novelist's situation to that of Ronnie Biggs, with whom, by coincidence, he shared a Rio hotel in the Seventies. I ask him what it is about blasphemy, if that is what Rushdie has committed, that warrants a death sentence.

Look at it rationally,' says Yusuf, without a sniff of irony. 'It's not the breaking of one law, it's the thin end of the wedge whereby,' and here he comes up with a malapropism that would surely make Rushdie smile, 'all that is held sanctimonious can be demolished.' Still, can he not see that it would be good for Islam if there was some reconciliation. He concedes this point and says that hope may lie in the fact that Islamic scholars have yet to give their judgment on the issue, before adding: 'We believe the conclusion would be the same.' The conclusion being a death sentence? 'I don't know, the scholars would have to work that out, not me,' he laughs with mock relief.

And if that's too distant in the past, here's the totalitarian mission statement of the Islamia School, of which Yusuf is the founder and chair of governors:

The ultimate aim of Islamic education is the realization of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large.

Jon Stewart, please stop hurting America. Please. Stop, stop, stop.

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