

Cagey about condemning the Islamic State

By Brendan O'Neill, Editor of *spiked*.

“Hey who are we to judge the Islamic State?” Why so many in the West are cagey about condemning the IS.

Is the West morally superior to the Islamic State?

To most people who own a working moral compass and have an IQ higher than 10, the answer to this question will seem obvious: yes, of course the West is better than that cowboy caliphate built on sand and insanity, on account of the fact that the West doesn't force women to live in black sackcloths, throw gays off the top of buildings, send Christians into exile, or burn people alive on TV. The modern West is a nicer, more pleasant entity than IS – simples. Or is it? Maybe not. Over the past week, more than a few notable voices in the West have been raised to say that maybe we aren't much better than IS, maybe we've done even worse things than them, and maybe we should therefore STFU and stop passing judgement on that eccentric foreign statelet.

Come down from the moral high-ground

You couldn't have asked for a better insight into the po-mo, relativistic, judgement-dodging mush of modern Western liberalism than the recent commentary on IS. No less a figure than President Obama got the ball rolling last week when he said at the National Prayer Breakfast that we largely Christian Westerners should **come down from the moral highground** on the issue of Islamist violence. ‘Lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ... [And] slavery and Jim Crow all too often [were] justified in the name of Christ’, **he said**. If you heard a smartarse sixth-former who'd just discovered Richard Dawkins' Twitterfeed and is prepping for a BA in post-colonialist codswallop say ‘We burned people 500 years ago, you know’, you wouldn't bat an eyelid. But the leader of the free world? The face of ostensibly Christian America? The man who, for better or worse, is the embodiment of the West? For Obama to respond to Islamist violence by saying ‘we did it, too’ is surreal — like if in 1985 Ronald Reagan had said, ‘I had to queue for eight minutes the other day to pay for my loaf of bread, so let's lay off the Soviets, yeah?’.

Bill Moyers, the White House press secretary under LBJ and now one of the key fist-clenching, head-tilting spokespeople for American liberalism, said he couldn't sleep after he heard that IS had burned to death the Jordanian pilot. No, not because his mind was swirling with thoughts of how wicked IS is, silly, but because he **kept thinking to himself**: America did the same shit. He said his mind filled with images of the ‘charred corpses’ of black men lynched in America's South decades ago, ‘tied to a blistered tree in the heart of the Texas Bible Belt’. He even got up in the middle of the night to Google images of these lynchings. Now there's some hardcore commitment to self-loathing: interrupting your night's sleep to search for gruesome old images that might confirm that America's historical heart is as black as the Islamic State's.

Your moral compass is bust

Moyers says that when he reads about IS's execution-by-burning, he thinks of America's own historic burners, ‘**our own barbarians**’: ‘Homegrown. Godly. Our neighbours, friends and kin.

People like us.’ I’m sorry, but if you look into the Islamic State’s flames and see yourself, if your first thought upon watching one of IS’s medieval snuff movies is to think of your neighbours and friends and how they allegedly once committed equally demented acts, then there’s something wrong with you. Your moral compass is bust. Here, American history is not something to study and understand but instead becomes a hairshirt of self-loathing we wrap around ourselves in order to hide from the apparently pesky task of passing moral judgement against a fiery pseudo-state in Syria. Hateful episodes from Western history are dredged up to the cynical end of avoiding making moral distinctions and decisions in the present.

Across the Western media, various voices have piped up to say that we in the West aren’t really virtuous enough to have a proper pop at the Islamic State. *The Economist*, one-time bible of the business class turned wet mag that now gives the *Guardian* a run for its money in the self-loathing lark, **said** Obama was dead right to tell Westerners to clamber down from their high horses. ‘If you think your side is too virtuous to sin, it probably will sin’, it said. An academic columnist said that before we bash IS we should ‘look to the French Revolution’, where people were also beheaded (in a brutal civil war for the Enlightened values of liberty and democracy, but hey, don’t mention that). **Chris Hedges**, former *New York Times* correspondent turned every pseudo-liberal’s favourite mouthpiece of Western self-hatred, dragged up various old and new instances of American imperialism and concluded: ‘The line that separates us from the Islamic State is technological, not moral.’ ‘The barbarism we condemn is the barbarism we commit’, **he said**, to the cheering of a million twits on Twitter who had clearly been feeling uncomfortable with the idea that the West is not quite as bad as IS. Hedges and others dress up their moral equivalence between the West and IS as radicalism, a searing critique of Western interventionism. It’s no such thing. It’s better understood as an unwillingness to pass moral judgement on IS — to say it is wicked — disguised as a keenness to condemn the political establishment in Washington and elsewhere.

This fag-packet theory needs more work

We’ve also had Glenn Greenwald, the David Icke of the dinner-party anti-war set, arguing that the Islamic State does not have ‘**a patent on burning people alive**’. Guess who else has done it? We have, of course! Oh, and Israel: Greenwald knows his audience and knows he’ll get a record number of retweets if he likens the Jewish State to the Islamic State. Meanwhile, a **very odd column** in the *Guardian* said we shouldn’t get on our high horses about the Islamic State’s manifesto for women, which among other things says nine-year-old girls can get married and women should always be covered from head to toe, because we in Britain still have cases like that of Ched Evans, the footballer imprisoned for rape and later released. What? Yes, apparently Evans’ supporters — ‘each and every one of them’ — have a ‘**good deal of common cause with the ideas of these women of the Islamic State**’. So thinking that ex-cons deserve a second stab at life is the same as living in a state that has ditched due process in favour of killing or maiming criminals? I think this fag-packet theory needs more work.

What unites all these expressions of discomfort with slamming IS, this repeated tendency to respond to IS atrocities by saying ‘What about the Inquisition, lynchings, slavery, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Dresden, Israel, the BNP, that terrible thing my granddad did in the Somme blah blah blah?’, is an unwillingness to judge, to condemn, to make any kind of strong moral distinction between different ways of life.

The West has become hamstrung by self-hatred

In recent years, the West has become hamstrung by self-hatred, consumed by doubt as to the value of modernity, democracy and Enlightenment, as expressed everywhere from campuses that are now more likely to condemn the sexism and racism of Dead White European Males than to read and devour their glorious works, to a school system that tells kids all cultures are equally valid, all religions are worthy of respect, all history is a bloody nightmare, and the Industrial Revolution is without question the worst thing that ever happened. In such a climate, it's become the fashion, the very thing, to be sniffy about the West, and more importantly to dodge like the plague the making of moral judgements, for who are we to judge considering our grandfathers might have lynched people and our great-great-great-great-great-great grandmothers probably chucked rotten tomatoes at a shoplifter? Anyone who thinks the kneejerk 'We're shits too' uttered in response to IS barbarism is radical, edgy, a challenge to Western imperialism, needs a brain scan — it's actually the now decades-old academic pursuit of eschewing Enlightenment values made political and media flesh, thrust into the global spotlight.

There's a serious debate to be had

There's a serious debate to be had about whether Western intervention is the solution to the problem of the Islamic State – we at *spiked* very strongly think it isn't. But this isn't that debate. This is excuse-making relativism elevated into a horrifying art-form. If you think your society isn't really much better than the Islamic State, then why not take a holiday in the Islamic State, try it out? Something tells me you'll soon come back to the West, even with its arrogant Christian preachers, ex-con footballers, searchable images of decades-old lynchings, and all the other apparently unspeakable horrors.