

Non-Binary Ayatollahs



by Theodore Dalrymple

The world has always had its political ironies, I suppose, but they seem more frequent than ever nowadays.

New Zealand's secular liberal saint, Jacinda Ardern, seems to be losing a little of her previously strong odor of sanctity. The case of Charlotte Bellis, a fellow female Kiwi, has not helped.

Bellis is a pregnant journalist who has long reported from the Middle East and who was stranded in Afghanistan. She was not allowed to return to her home country, as she desperately wanted to do, because of its draconian COVID restrictions, according to which citizens returning from abroad must first spend time in quarantine hotels. The number of places in these hotels is grossly inferior to the number of would-be returning citizens, so the places are allotted on a lottery basis. Bellis did not win the lottery, despite attempts to do so.

In typical bureaucratic fashion, the rules were interpreted strictly, and made no allowance for the fact that to be stranded pregnant in Afghanistan is a good deal more worrying than to be stranded, middle-aged, non-pregnant, and prosperous, in, say, Switzerland. No doubt the bureaucracy wanted to avoid charges of favoritism—one rule for the prominent and another for the unknown—but it did Ardern's

popularity no good that Bellis felt constrained to turn to those well-known feminist humanitarians, the Taliban, for assistance. They seem to have done the trick: Bellis has now been allowed to return to New Zealand; but in the process, Ardern's government, not long ago praised as the model for all civilized countries to follow, has been made to look stupid, cruel, and weak.

At the same time, in France, there has been an outcry over a television program about the northern town of Roubaix, which once attracted labor from North Africa for its textile factories, but which, now that those factories have closed down, has become a place of high unemployment and allegedly a breeding ground of Islamism, especially among the second or third generation.

A French television presenter, Ophélie Meunier, fronted a television documentary in which she reinforced Roubaix's reputation as a hotbed of Islamism. Having been often refused permission to film openly, the documentary maker went round the town with hidden cameras. She found restaurants with cubicles curtained off for women customers only, and toy shops selling dolls with no human features because of the Islamic prohibition of the representation of the human face. Éric Zemmour, the right-wing candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections, with his gift for dramatic phrase-making, called Roubaix "Afghanistan two hours from Paris."

Naturally, the portrayal of the town raised hackles there. In the making of any such film—in any act of reportage—there's the problem of selection. With clever editing, Heaven could be made to look like Hell, and no doubt vice versa. My very few contacts, rather unhappy, with television contacts, have made me very skeptical of the bona fides of many producers and others in the making of programs. Documentary makers often find what they set out to find.

On the other hand, they also film at least a portion of

reality, often a portion of reality that some people would rather not be known. Meunier filmed the documentary with the help of a young lawyer from Roubaix, Amine Elbahi, whose sister went off in 2014 to join the Islamic State and is now imprisoned in Syria, not permitted to return to France. Elbahi's status as a lawyer suggests that Islamism is not the only choice in France for descendants of North African immigrants, however difficult life may be for them; and in fact Elbahi has been prominent in drawing attention to the progressive Islamization of Roubaix and places like it. As if desiring to prove him right, Islamists have sent him hundreds of death threats, and Meunier has now received dozens as well. They are both under police protection and Elbahi has had to move home.

The irony, however, is this: It was allegedly a shock, almost an outrage, that dolls were being sold in Roubaix without human visages because of Islamic prohibition of such representations (as well as children's books with pictures without faces), when ideological manipulation or censorship of dolls and the illustrations in children's books has been going on for a long time in the West. Indeed, certain kinds of sexual warriors should really welcome the appearance in Roubaix, and no doubt elsewhere, of what one might call *non-binary* dolls. What better way of avoiding stereotypes than to give pictures and dolls no facial features whatever. There remains, of course, the problem of color, but I would suggest apple green, or some other color that no human face could possibly be.

Of course, there's the further problem of *speciesism*. The Roubaix dolls, though devoid of facial features, nevertheless retain large elements of the human form, thus indoctrinating children into a prejudice in favor of their own species, to the detriment of the wasps and the worms. Moreover, not all creatures have arms and legs or even heads. Some, indeed, are unicellular. I would suggest, then, that to get over this

problem, this speciesist assumption that the human form should be of special interest and importance to humans, that all dolls in future should be shaped like amoeboid blobs. It's never too early to root out children's prejudices, and if possible to prevent them from forming in the first place.

Anything else serves what radical academics call *essentialism*. For example, to dress female dolls in clothes that have in the past been taken to signify femininity is to suggest that these forms of dress are an essential characteristic of being female: In other words, to *be* a woman is to dress in like fashion. This is clearly designed to keep women in their place; but the same objection obtains for all possible definite features in toys, dolls, or illustrations. In short, all pictures and all toys for children should be entirely abstract.

Thus, the sexual reformers and the Islamic fundamentalists of Roubaix are at one: They're fighting a similar, though perhaps not identical, battle. I have seen the future, and it is Roubaix.

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