

Crusaders in search of a crusade

Frank Furedi

Abstract: Frank Furedi argues that the Burmese and other Eastern governments have been found guilty of a new crime: refusing to allow in Western experts. Further below, Brendan O'Neill says the media coverage of Burma and Austria is more like moral pornography than serious analysis.

Key words: Holy war; Crusaders

中图分类号: G0

文献标识码:

Recently, I have found it difficult to take seriously Western media coverage of events overseas. Often, the coverage is driven by a mean-spirited desire to discover that 'they', too, have problems – and that many of them are far worse than ours. There seems to be an urge to deliver shallow sermons about the failures of morally inferior communities, and an impulse to gloat over their troubles. Within minutes of receiving news about the terrible earthquake in China this week, we were told about the shoddy structures built by corrupt contractors, who were so concerned with taking advantage of the country's economic miracle that they didn't bother to make anything earthquake-proof.

Events that occur far away give the media a licence to live out its fantasies, and allow it to tell cautionary tales about dark places over there. Until recently, the media obsession with the pornography of suffering was confined to Africa, and to a handful of 'failed' societies. In the US, Darfur has become the cause célèbre of an entertainment industry in search of a crusade. Across the Atlantic, here in Britain, Zimbabwe has emerged as the ideal place for a twenty-first century replay of the Heart of Darkness. Only this time Kurtz – the white ivory trader-cum-demigod in Conrad's novel – has a microphone in his hand as he tells TV viewers that 'something must be done'.

Today, however, you don't the need to be a octagenarian dictator running a broken country in Africa to get a starring role in the new morality plays about the workings of evil. More recently, even countries that are culturally very close to home have become objects of moral condemnation. The reports and commentaries on the unusual and sordid crime committed by Josef Fritzl swiftly turned into a tale about the defects of the Austrian psyche. Instead of treating his terrible deeds as just that – an appalling crime – commentators took it upon themselves to dig into Austria's past and discover its national flaws. Before long, ominous hints about Austria's Nazi past began to surface. Some treated this individual act of depravity as evidence that evil sporting a brown shirt lives in the genteel suburbs of the Austrian nation (see *Is there a Josef Fritzl on your street?*, by Brendan O'Neill).

Brown shirts? Anyone who has spent time in Austria in recent years must seriously be calling into question their ability to make sense of the world. After all, outwardly Austria is an unusually decent and civilised place. By all appearances it has a low crime rate, visitors feel very safe, and the locals are friendly and helpful. People are well educated and young people are well behaved. This reality appears to be very different from the one promoted by moral entrepreneurs who constantly seek out human

corruption and degradation in the most unlikely of places.

If even Austria can be transformed into a symbol of moral disorientation, what hope can there be for a place like China, or worse, Burma? The response of the civilised world to the humanitarian crisis that has struck Burma has been anything but humanitarian. Western governments and the media have devoted most of their energies towards depicting Burma as their moral opposite. The Burmese government is portrayed as a monstrous regime indifferent to the terrible consequences of Cyclone Nargis for Burmese society.

Almost imperceptibly, the misdeeds and incompetence of the Burmese government have been described by some as the moral equivalent of committing a genocide. Time magazine's world editor, Romesh Ratnesar, points out that the death toll in Burma is likely to approach 'the entire number of civilians killed in the genocide in Darfur'. This casual conceptual leap from the catastrophe wrought by Cyclone Nargis on the people of Burma to genocide in Africa is symptomatic of the profound moral illiteracy that haunts sections of the Western media. The media seems like a crusader desperately in search of a crusade. Indeed, the very mention of that terrible word, 'genocide', serves as an incitement for a crusade. On Burma, Ratnesar is concerned that the 'world has yet to reach a consensus about when, and under what circumstances, coercive interventions in the name of averting humanitarian disasters are permissible', and on a note of impatience he concludes that 'we still haven't figured out when to give war a chance' (1). In this theatre of the unreal, giving war a chance is transformed into an act of cosmopolitan virtue.

The fantasy of 'giving war a chance' has stirred the imagination of crusading moral entrepreneurs across the West. Numerous commentators huff and puff and demand to know why the West is reluctant to use coercion and force to save Burma from its government. What has happened to the 'coalition of the willing', asked one American commentator? If regime change was good enough for Iraq, why not Burma?

The crime of not letting in the experts

As everyone knows, the Burmese government does not have a monopoly on practising coercive and authoritarian rule. Nor is it unique in pursuing a policy that puts its own narrow self-interest before the interests of its people. It may well be indifferent to the plight afflicting parts of the country, but then again so are many other regimes during times of crisis or war. Indeed, in its staggering ineptitude in responding to the disaster, the Burmese government resembles other governments. As some critics have pointed out, after the incompetent response to Hurricane Katrina the US government has little authority to lecture others about disaster management.

What appears to be the principal crime of the Burmese government is its refusal to let in the experts. It seems it is simply not acceptable for a country like Burma to attempt to take charge of rescue and relief efforts. Television footage showing Burmese rescue workers shifting aid packages by hand is used to underline the point that these people cannot handle the emergency. They don't have trucks or helicopters, and above all they don't have Western humanitarian aid workers! The news voiceover expresses outrage at the refusal of a helpless government to embrace the outside expert.

The Burmese government may well be unusually secretive, and even paranoid, but it is hardly unique in its refusal to allow foreign experts to take over the management of its catastrophe. In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, the Sri Lankan and Indonesian regimes were very reluctant to allow Western aid organisations into their disaster zones. The Indian government was also suspicious about the role of aid organisations in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. And, of course, China has just indicated that, while it is happy to receive foreign aid, it does not want international rescue experts on its soil. Such a response may seem irrational to some, but it is not at all unusual. Many countries still take the idea of sovereignty quite seriously and regard foreign experts as a potential threat to the integrity of their society. Rightly or wrongly, the Burmese government has calculated that the demand to let in Western experts represents the first step towards implementing an externally-led form of regime change.

One point that has been overlooked is that for all of its 'irrational' and 'paranoid' behaviour, the Burmese government has been happy, from the outset, to accept assistance from China, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Laos and Bangladesh. It is also worth remembering that when it comes to disasters, experts are overrated. In many disaster zones, people are rescued by members of their own community. By the time first responders and experts arrive, most of the people who are likely to survive will have been rescued through the often chaotic efforts of local people. In Burma, too, local communities did their best to assist those who needed help. What they now need in order to alleviate the suffering is material assistance rather than an army of humanitarian experts. They certainly don't need to contend with a primitive moral crusade which can only distract them from the job of survival and recovery.

The one question that is rarely posed in an explicit form is this: 'Give war a chance to do what?' For the only answer that suggests itself is: 'Something.' Although China is frequently the target of the liberal elites' invective – after all, the Chinese are active in Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan, and who knows, probably in Austria too – there is little in the way of geo-political interest driving the crusade. This is not so much a bona fide crusade as a hesitant attempt to assert moral authority through a tawdry sacralisation of our expertise.

寻找神圣战争的十字军战士

弗兰克·菲雷迪

吴万伟 译

摘要：从缅甸到中国到奥地利，为什么西方观察家总是在寻找人类堕落的迹象？作者认为缅甸和其他东方国家的政府已经被认定犯下了新罪行：拒绝西方专家的帮助。

关键词：神圣战争，十字军战士

收稿日期: 2008-5-1