

A MUSLIM SCHOLAR SPEAKS HIS MIND

The Explanation We Never Heard

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NB: Four members of my own Department signed the petition against me: Lavinia Stan, Yvon Grenier, Lars Hallstrom and Steve Holloway.

Six months after attending a controversial Tehran conference, a Canadian professor charges the media and his own university with ignorance and intolerance.

AN ESSAY

By Shiraz Dossa

It would be a shocking event in any university. It was doubly so in a university that takes pride in its “Catholic character.” Last December, St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, authorized a small Spanish Inquisition of its own to denounce a St. FX Muslim professor. It was launched by two Jewish professors and the Christian chair of the political science department (Michael Steinitz, Samuel Kalman and Yvon Grenier). My sin: I attended a conference in a Muslim nation on the Holocaust entitled *The Review of the Holocaust: Global Vision*. It took place in Tehran, Iran, in December 2006, and it was widely—and erroneously—described in the western media as a “Holocaust-denial conference.”

I have never denied the Holocaust, only noted its propaganda power. Yet my university tolerated this assault on me. I was stunned by the university’s illiteracy and bias. I was appalled by President Sean Riley’s attack on my reputation and his spurious comments on the conference. In his December 13, 2006, statement he insinuated that the “conference” was bogus and that it revealed a “deplorable anti-Semitism” that the “St. FX community” found “deeply abhorrent” and contrary to its “traditions.” Riley left little doubt that I was guilty of sullyng my school’s reputation. St. FX in effect sanctioned a crusade against a Muslim Holocaust scholar, who also happens to be an outspoken critic of Israel’s brutality in occupied Palestine.

What follows is my view of the events of last December, and my interpretation of the responses to them in the media and at my university.

Two Fallacies

The anti-intellectual storm at St. FX was driven by two fallacies pushed by the media and the literati. The first is that Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has dismissed the Holocaust as a “myth” and threatened to “wipe Israel off the map.” In fact, Ahmadinejad

has not denied the Holocaust or proposed Israel's liquidation; he has never done so in any of his speeches on the subject (all delivered in Farsi/Persian). As an Iran specialist, I can attest that both accusations are false. U.S. Iran experts such as Juan Cole and UK journalists such as Jonathan Steele have come to the same conclusion.¹

As Cole correctly notes, Ahmadinejad was quoting the Ayatollah Khomeini in the specific speech under discussion: what he said was that "the occupation regime over Jerusalem should vanish from the page of time."² No state action is envisaged in this lament; it denotes a spiritual wish, whereas the erroneous translation—"wipe Israel off the map"—suggests a military threat. There is a huge chasm between the correct and the incorrect translations. The notion that Iran can "wipe out" U.S.-backed, nuclear-armed Israel is ludicrous.

What Ahmadinejad *has* questioned is the mythologizing, the sacralization, of the Holocaust and the "Zionist regime's" continued killing of Palestinians and Muslims. He has even raised doubts about the scale of the Holocaust. His rhetoric has been excessive and provocative. And he does not really care what we in the West think about Iran or Muslims; he does not kowtow to western or Israeli *diktat*. Such questioning and criticism are not new: Jewish scholars such as Adi Ophir, Ilan Pappé, Boas Evron, Tom Segev and Uri Davis have been doing it for two decades. None of this is Holocaust denial.

The second western fallacy is that the event was a Holocaust-denial conference because of the presence of a few notorious western Christian deniers/skeptics, a couple of a neo-Nazi stripe. It was nothing of the sort. It was a Global South conference convened to devise an intellectual/political response to western-Israeli intervention in Muslim affairs. Holocaust deniers/skeptics were a fringe, a marginal few at the conference. The majority of the papers focused on the use and abuse of the Holocaust in Arab, Muslim, Israeli and western politics, a serious and worthy subject for international academic discussion.

Out of the 33 conference paper givers, 27 were *not* Holocaust deniers, but were university professors and social science researchers from Iran, Jordan, Algeria, India, Morocco, Bahrain, Tunisia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Syria. In attendance were five rabbis (anti-Zionist rabbis, to be sure) who agreed with Rabbi Dovid Weiss of New York that Israel's occupation policy was "evil" and un-Jewish, and the Holocaust could never justify it—but who insisted, like me, that the Holocaust was a reality. None of us knew that a few deniers/skeptics would be in attendance. This is not at all unusual in the Islamic world. In southern conferences, one rarely knows who will be appearing until one gets there.

The Iranian Institute of Political and International Studies (IPIS), an elite school of advanced politics and policy studies that offers MA and PhD programs, sponsored the Iran conference. It was not sponsored by the Iranian president Dr. Ahmadinejad; he did not attend or participate in the conference. It was not a Holocaust-denial conference by any stretch. That's all false.

President Riley and his supporters at St. FX bought the denial fallacy that had been concocted by the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Jewish Defense League, and peddled

by media outlets such as *The Globe and Mail*. On December 11, 2006, the Simon Wiesenthal Center sent out a condemning press release about “Iran’s Holocaust Denial Conference” to news media in the U.S. and Canada.³ It was the Zionists and the neo-Nazis who, for very different, self-serving reasons, depicted it as a Holocaust-denial conference and sold it to willing, anti-Iranian Islamophobes.

Comparative Appearances

Coincidentally, on December 11, 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice officially welcomed Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, to Washington on behalf of the U.S. government. Lieberman also met Senator Hillary Clinton and ex-President Bill Clinton. The Americans were not at all troubled by their guest’s stance on the Palestinians. Avigdor Lieberman is committed to ridding Israel of its Arabs—in effect, to ethnic cleansing. In the Israeli media (*Ha’aretz*), he has openly been labelled a racist and a fascist. U.S. critics have called him the Israeli David Duke.

Canada silently acquiesced in Lieberman’s inclusion in the Israeli cabinet. And in January 2007 Peter MacKay addressed the Herzliya Conference in Israel affirming Canada’s attachment to “freedom and democracy,” “values” that “make Canada and Israel so close.” He was there in his official capacity as Canada’s foreign minister. MacKay refused to meet with the leaders of the new elected Palestinian government (Hamas). The government of Canada is not concerned that an anti-Arab ethnic cleanser is Israel’s deputy prime minister. Canadians do hypocrisy rather well.

Consider also, in this connection, an event held at St. FX in September 2006, just three months before the Tehran conference. St. FX and the Religious Studies Department hosted a conference on Catholic-Jewish dialogue. One of the invited speakers was Rabbi Richard Rubenstein, a “distinguished” academic, according to his hosts. He did little to advance the Catholic-Jewish dialogue.

Instead, he launched a vicious attack on Islam, its Prophet and Muslims in the West as a fifth column corroding Christian civilization from within. The good rabbi declared that “genocide” and the “murder” of non-Muslims lay at the heart of Islam. Rubenstein seemed to believe his views would be well received. And apparently they were—by the largely Catholic-Christian audience.

St. FX chancellor Bishop Raymond Lahey and I were on the response panel; I condemned Rubenstein’s anti-Muslim tirade and his labelling of Islam as “Islamofascism,” which in my view is as offensive, racist and false as denying the Holocaust. Bishop Lahey, in his comment, said nothing about Rubenstein’s anti-Islamism. This was a St. Francis Xavier University conference that occurred with the blessing of university president Riley and university chancellor Bishop Lahey, and St. FX provided a public platform to an anti-Muslim, anti-Iranian racist rabbi. My point in making the comparison is that this was still a scholarly, enlightening conference although tainted by Rubenstein’s hate-speech. So was the Iran conference on the Holocaust, although tainted by the presence of a few western, Christian Holocaust deniers.

Islamophobia

So how and why did this attack on my reputation occur?

The Globe and Mail fired the initial shot in its editorial on December 13, 2006. It was followed by a declaration of war on me by its “pundits” John Ibbitson and Rex Murphy, dilettantes extraordinaire on the Holocaust and the Middle East. Neither of these journalists has credibility in either field. Ibbitson hectoring me in his usual CNN mode, got most things wrong and casually libelled me in the process.⁴ Since 9/11, he hasn’t let up on Islam or Muslims. Murphy, in his column “Eichmann in Tehran,” displayed his cerebral deficits and his ignorance of Islam, Iran and Hannah Arendt with enviable facility.⁵ Like Ibbitson, Murphy impresses those intellectually just a cut above the Trailer Park Boys. It is worth noting that these Christian boys have unlimited latitude in *The Globe and Mail* to trash Muslims even as they defend “civilization,” Israel and Jews.

My university joined the assault on me forthwith. Chancellor Lahey assured *The Globe and Mail’s* readers, in his letter to the editor on December 14, 2006, that the conference and my attendance were “contrary” to the “[promotion of] truth” and indeed “worthy of contempt.” It is significant that Riley and Lahey have no scholarly expertise on Islam, Iran or the Holocaust either. I believe they wanted to assure the white, mainstream Canadian community, including Canadian Jews, that “Catholic” St. FX was on their side, and this desire far outweighed their obligation to defend academic freedom. Since I was in Iran as a Holocaust expert, and not representing St. FX or Catholics, I found this a bizarre response. Are Riley and Lahey at the helm of a university committed to the academic freedom of its entire faculty, which includes Muslims? Or is St. FX’s hyped “inclusiveness” only for Christians and Jews? I have been a St. FX professor for 18 years, a full professor since 1996.

Was it an accident that I was swarmed—by petition—by Jewish and Christian professors, with the blessing of St. FX’s Catholic leaders? The petition oddly defended my “academic freedom . . . to espouse any views that he pleases,” but then negated my right to do so by being “profoundly embarrassed by his participation in the Holocaust-denial conference held in Tehran.” It garnered a fair number of signatures from current and retired professors—about 24 percent of the total faculty at St. FX. But surely these righteous folks are not racist? Surely this could not happen at St. FX, a Catholic institution with its Coady International Institute tradition of decency? It is crucial to stress that many townspeople were incensed by St. FX’s behaviour, among them Miles Tompkins, a direct descendant of Coady’s founder, J.J. Tompkins, and of Moses Coady. In a letter to the local paper, *The Casket*, on March 21, he chastised St. FX’s conduct and also noted that my “political science department’s response was an embarrassment to the University.”

Was this then an un-Christian lapse, an un-Catholic aberration? It would seem not. We tend to forget that Catholic anti-Semitism has always had two strands, anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish. The anti-Jewish strand has been dominant in western culture for several

centuries. In the post-Holocaust period, however, the anti-Muslim strand, which survived the Crusades, got a new lease on life and quickly superseded anti-Jewish anti-Semitism for obvious reasons. As a result, Muslims now bear the brunt of western anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in de rigueur in the liberal Christian West, in support of our war on the “Axis of Evil,” including Iran. The anti-Iranian, anti-Muslim current at St. FX is not accidental; it is the distilled voice of Canadian Islamophobia in these times.

Final Thoughts

Universities are places of discontent; they provoke disputes, they offer critiques of conventional and, often, false views. A university that tailors its teaching and research to the prejudices of its alumni or corporate backers is a travesty. Academic freedom is not conditional on the approval of the university or of university colleagues. Nor is the reputation of the university as an institution tied to the scholarly focus of its faculty or to the controversial subjects that faculty may pursue in their field of expertise.

Iran’s elites have protected Jews since Cyrus ruled West Asia. Anti-Semitism is a Euro-American problem, not an Islamic one. Iranian opposition to Israel and its wars on Muslims/Palestinians is ethical and political; it has absolutely nothing to do with hating Jews *qua* Jews. It is a great pity that Sean Riley and Bishop Lahey ignored St. FX’s motto, an injunction to first ascertain *Quaecumque Sunt Vera*, Whatsoever Things Are True, and instead tolerated the assault by St. FX’s ignorant crusaders on the reputation of their Muslim colleague.

I would be remiss if I failed to note that two St. FX officials behaved honourably, with the kind of Catholic decency that befits our university, throughout the course of this episode of academic McCarthyism. Academic Vice-President Dr. Mary McGillivray and the Dean of Arts, Dr. Steven Baldner, tackled the controversy with integrity and respect for the liberal values that St. FX symbolizes. As well, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) strongly supported my academic freedom. In his letter to *The Globe and Mail* on December 14, 2006 (which the paper did not print), Executive Director Jim Turk stated that “academic freedom is to protect the right of academic staff to speak the truth as they see it without repression from their institution, the state, religious authorities, special interest groups or anyone else.”⁶

Notes

1. Jonathan Steele, “If Iran Is Ready to Talk, The US Must Do So Unconditionally,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2006, and “Lost in Translation,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2006.
2. Juan Cole, “Hitchens the Hacker; And, Hitchens the Orientalist; And, ‘We Don’t Want Your Stinking War!’,” “Informed Consent,” May 3, 2006
www.juancole.com/2006/05/hitchens-hacker-and-hitchens.html
3. Simon Wiesenthal Center, “Holocaust Survivors in Three Cities Across North America Join Together to Confront Iran’s Conference of Holocaust Deniers and Revisionists,” News Release, December 11, 2006.

4. John Ibbitson, "Even a Scholar's Academic Freedom Has Its Limits in Canada," *Globe and Mail*, December 14, 2006, page A7.
5. Rex Murphy, "Eichmann in Tehran: Horror Revisited," *Globe and Mail*, December 16, 2006, page A31.
6. Canadian Association of University Teachers, "Statement on the Controversy over Professor Shiraz Dossa," News Release, December 14, 2006
www.caut.ca/en/news/comms/20061214dossa.asp

Professor who attended Holocaust conference blasts critics as Islamophobes

MICHAEL VALPY

From Monday's Globe and Mail

May 28, 2007

A Canadian political scientist excoriated for attending what was widely labelled a Holocaust-denial conference in Tehran has retaliated with a blistering published attack on his university president and his colleagues for being illiterate Islamophobes.

Writing in the influential *Literary Review of Canada*, Shiraz Dossa, a tenured professor at Nova Scotia's St. Francis Xavier University, said that his academic integrity and academic freedom were grossly impugned by the university administration, an assault on his reputation that he said has yet to be remedied.

He accused the president and chancellor of authorizing a "small Spanish Inquisition" to denounce him - a campaign he said was initiated by two Jewish professors and the Christian chair of the political science department.

Prof. Dossa also wrote that the attack on his reputation was launched by *The Globe and Mail's* editorial board and by columnists John Ibbitson and Rex Murphy, whom he described as being "intellectually just a cut above the Trailer Park Boys" and ignorant of the Middle East.

James Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, likened the treatment of Prof. Dossa to the 1950s McCarthy period in the United States when academics and others were subjected to intense pressure not to attend events that were unpopular.

This is the first time Prof. Dossa has spoken out since the storm erupted over his attendance at the Tehran conference in mid-December.

His two-page essay appears in the issue of the LRC that will be posted today on its website. Although the monthly publication's circulation is small, it is widely read in the academic, journalistic, political and public-service communities.

In an interview, Prof. Dossa said he wrote the essay because he wanted to set the record straight and because he still hasn't received an apology from either St. FX president Sean Riley or chancellor Raymond Lahey, the Roman Catholic bishop of Antigonish where the university is located. He also said he has refused to speak to his department chair, Prof. Yvon Grenier, since December.

He wrote that the university administration uncritically accepted the Holocaust-denial label "concocted by the Simon Wiesenthal Center [a Jewish human-rights organization] and the [U.S.] Jewish Defence League and peddled by media outlets such as The Globe and Mail."

Prof. Dossa, a Muslim, teaches political theory and comparative politics at St. FX. His focus as a scholar has been on the Holocaust and its aftermath. He abruptly dismisses any suggestion that he is a Holocaust denier. Rather, he said, his interest has been in what use of the Holocaust has been made to promote Zionism - the right of Jews to a national homeland - and to support the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.

In both his essay and in a telephone conversation, he makes a compelling case for why he attended the two-day Tehran conference, titled "The Review of the Holocaust: Global Vision."

It was a conference for scholars in the global South, said Prof. Dossa, who wanted to examine the Holocaust and its significance unrestrained by the lenses through which it is viewed by the West, and "to devise an intellectual [and] political response to Western-Israeli intervention in Muslim affairs."

The global South generally refers to the nations of Africa, Central and Latin America and most of Asia.

He wrote in the LRC: "I was appalled by president Sean Riley's attack on my reputation and his spurious comments on the conference. In his Dec, 13, 2006, statement, he insinuated that the conference was bogus and that it revealed a 'deplorable anti-Semitism' that the 'St. FX community' found 'deeply abhorrent' and contrary to its 'traditions.' Riley left little doubt that I was guilty of sullyng my school's reputation.

"Riley and Lahey have no scholastic expertise on Islam, Iran or the Holocaust. ... I believe they wanted to assure the white, mainstream Canadian community, including Canadian Jews, that 'Catholic' St. FX was on their side and that this desire far outweighed their obligation to defend academic freedom.

"Are Riley and Lahey at the helm of a university committed to the academic freedom of its entire faculty, which includes Muslims? Or is St. FX's hyped 'inclusiveness' only for Christians and Jews?"

The conference became controversial the moment it was announced by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Prof. Dossa readily concedes that the President's rhetoric about the Holocaust - particularly his questioning of its scale - "has been excessive and provocative."

The conference was organized by the Iranian Foreign Ministry's Institute of Political and International Studies, which is respected internationally and has run United Nations conferences in the past. More than 1,200 people attended.

There were 44 speakers and 33 papers presented - five of which were given by notorious Western Holocaust deniers.

The other presenters were scholars examining the Holocaust from a global South perspective.

Prof. Dossa said the presenters, himself included, were invited, but he said he had no idea in advance that Holocaust deniers were on the list. He said that, until his arrival in Tehran, he did not see an agenda, something he said is not uncommon for global South conferences.

He described the presentations by the Holocaust deniers as absurd. At the session Prof. Dossa attended where one of the Holocaust deniers spoke, the presentation was torn to shreds afterward by the largely Iranian audience.

He said he would not have attended a conference entirely of Holocaust deniers because it would have held no scholarly or intellectual interest for him. But a conference with five Holocaust deniers was of academic interest for him to see what kind of reception they'd be given.

James Turk of CAUT said: "In this case, there was an aggressive attempt based on very little information to denigrate Prof. Dossa and to vilify him."