

# Dr. Knight Would Have Smiled

*John K. Nixon*

In 1954 a hitherto unknown lecturer in psychology at Aberdeen University by the name of Dr. Margaret Knight gave two talks on BBC radio. The title of the talks was *Morals without Religion*. The thrust of her argument was a challenge to the widely held notion that, to live a moral life, one had to belong to an organized religion. “There is no reason” she stated “why we should not retain the valuable parts of the Christian ethic, such as its emphasis on love, while rejecting the belief that Christ was divine”.

The reaction to her broadcast was widespread outrage in the national press. *The Daily Express* issued a banner headline declaring: “Woman Psychologist

Makes Remarkable Attack on Religion”. *The Daily Telegraph* labelled the talk “...one large slab of atheistical propaganda, offensive to public feeling...” and called on God and the BBC to cancel the second broadcast. *The Sunday Graphic* published a photo of Margaret Knight, captioned in two-inch lettering: The Unholy Mrs. Knight. “Don’t let this woman fool you.” an accompanying article began. “She looks – doesn’t she – just like the typical housewife: cool, comfortable, harmless? But Mrs. Knight is a menace, a dangerous woman. Make no mistake about that. The BBC have allowed a fanatic to rampage along the air lanes beating up on Christianity with a razor and a bicycle chain”.

The hysterical reaction to Dr. Knight’s talks came at a time when it was still naturally accepted by the majority of Britons that the organized religions were the ultimate arbiters on

what constituted morality. Anyone who claimed to live a decent and honest life, but who did not attend a church or synagogue, was somehow suspect and was almost certainly an atheistic Communist, or worse.

This attitude had prevailed for many centuries in the Christian West. Any challenge to the decrees of the established Church was met with harsh punishment which could result in excommunication, torture or even death. Historical examples abound of the sometimes ferocious reaction by the Church hierarchy to those who dared to defy ecclesiastical authority.

In 1209 AD a band of armed men under the command of Simon de

Montfort converged on the picturesque town of Beziers in southern France. They had been dispatched by Philip II, King of France, under the urging of Pope Innocent III, to punish the Cathars, who were concentrated in that region. The town was ransacked, the buildings set alight, and between 15,000 and 20,000 of the inhabitants were slaughtered. No mercy was shown with regard to age or sex. Prisoners taken were blinded, mutilated, dragged behind horses and used for target practice by archers. When asked beforehand how the attackers would be able to distinguish between the faithful and the heretics, Abbot Arnald Almaric responded: “Kill them all. God will look after his own.”

What had the Cathars done to be branded by the Church as the “Children of Satan, heretics, worse even than the Saracens.” Their sin had been to decide that they no longer needed a Catholic

***“Kill them all. God will look after his own.”***

priesthood. They believed in approaching God directly through a life of abstinence and prayer, rejecting the dogmas of damnation and hell.

In the century before the slaughter of the Cathars, European Christians had been engaged in periodic Crusades to regain the holy city of Jerusalem from the infidel Muslim occupiers and to avenge the death of Christ by the Jews. One popular slogan was: "We shall slay in God's love", while St. Bernard preached: "A Christian glories in the death of a Moslem because Christ is glorified." After all, St. Augustine had proclaimed that "violence in support of the Faith could be justified so long as it was expressing the will of God."

During the First Crusade the inhabitants of Jerusalem resisted the siege by the French and German knights for 40 days. Finally the Crusaders breached the walls, entered the city and began an enthusiastic slaughter of the citizens. Muslims who had sought shelter in the al Aqsa mosque were all massacred, while Jews who fled to the synagogues for sanctuary were all burned alive inside them. In all between 30,000 and 40,000 were killed in two days.

A Christian knight wrote approvingly: "Wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men cut off the heads of our enemies, others shot them with arrows so that they fell from the towers, others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands and feet were to be seen on the streets of the city. Not one of them was allowed to live. They did not spare the women or children. The horses waded in blood up to their knees. It was a just and wonderful judgement of God."

In subsequent centuries the authority of the established Church was maintained through the threat of punishment and the spectre of Purgatory and Hell for those that dissented. In 1231, obsessed with the perceived growing threat of heresy, Pope Gregory IX created the Papal Inquisition, the most dreaded institution of mediaeval Christendom. Prosecution witnesses and informers did not have to give their names, the accused had no right of defence and there was no recourse to appeal the verdict. Those who refused to confess were imprisoned and tortured until

they relented. In a gesture of magnanimity, pregnant women were excused torture until they had delivered, while only mild torture was permitted for children and old people.

In 1484 the infamous Spanish Inquisition was established by Thomas de Torquemada and sanctioned by Pope Sixtus IV. Shortly before that the Moors, who had ruled Spain for about 700 years, were defeated by Los Reyes Catolicos and Catholicism became the country's official religion. Before long, to curb the growing influence of the Jews in commerce, finance and the arts, the Church decided to investigate the Jewish community for heresy. The Inquisition continued on and off for the next 300 years or so. Until Torquemada died in 1497 it is estimated that as many as 10,000 may have been executed, with another 90,000 sent into slavery. Most executions were public, the victims burned at the stake with their bodies hoisted as far as possible above the stake to prolong their agonies.

Of course, brutality in the name of religion was by no means confined to Christians. In the New World, the Mayans, Incas and Aztecs all had Gods which were periodically appeased by the most appalling human sacrifices. Outraged by what they considered barbaric practices, the Spanish Conquistadores, with the ardent support of Jesuit priests, ordered the forced conversion of the indigenous people, frequently demanding payment in gold from their leaders and death for those who refused.

Within Islam, violence in the name of a particular view of the religion has periodically surfaced. The split between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam started as a dispute over the leadership of the Muslim community after the death of Mohammed. At first a political divide, it has over the years become a fundamental split in religious interpretation. In recent years, in countries such as Iraq and Pakistan, Sunni and Shia Muslims have employed suicide bombs and grenades to attack each other in mosques and on pilgrimages. Such attacks have reached epidemic proportions.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia imposed a pure form of Islam that rejected all Western ideas as symptomatic of the

perceived decadence of the Crusader infidels. Strict interpretation of Sharia law entrenched the death penalty (usually by public execution) for the sins of apostasy and blasphemy against Islam and its prophet. Women convicted of adultery could be stoned to death, while buried to the neck in a pit. Today we see the excesses of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the growing international threat of Al Qaeda, both inspired by the Wahhabi doctrine, under which violence in the name of their religion is both justified and honourable.

Perhaps the most appalling display of religious intolerance surfaced after the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The subsequent conflict between Muslims and Hindus resulted in the loss of up to one million lives and the displacement of an estimated 12.5 million people – probably the largest forced population displacement in human history.

Amid all this carnage there has been the occasional sign that reason can prevail. In Northern Ireland a rapprochement between Protestants and Catholics has come at the end of “300 years in which they were killing each other’s children for being the wrong kind of Christian”, as observed by Christopher Hitchens.

Since the Second World War there has been a continuing decline in the number of churchgoers in most Christian sects. This has been accompanied by a rise in the number of adherents in Islam, aided by a higher birthrate among the Muslim populations. As Western society has become progressively more secular, books by atheists and agnostics such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens have become best sellers. The Somali-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali, living under a constant threat of death, has written two courageous books detailing her flight from Somalia and rejection of

the barbaric practices of fanatical Islam.

In September 2010 Ipsos conducted a poll of over 18,000 inhabitants of 23 countries on religion. In aggregate 48% supported the view that “religion provides the common values and

ethical foundations that diverse societies need to thrive in the 21st century”. Fractionally more (52%) agreed that “religious beliefs promote intolerance, exacerbate ethnic divisions and impede social progress in developing and developed nations alike”. The proportion of the population in support of religion varied from over 90% in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia to a

low of 19% in Sweden. This compared to 36% in Canada and 30% in Britain.

Toronto’s Roy Thompson Hall was the scene of a debate in November 2010 on the proposition that “Religion is a force for good in the world”. Supporting the motion was Tony Blair, former British prime minister, while Christopher Hitchens, author and columnist, spoke in opposition. The debate was a sell-out, with 2,700 tickets sold in less than three hours, an all-time record for the venue. In a post-debate vote by listeners, the motion was defeated by a margin of almost two to one.

Something tells me that Dr. Margaret Knight, wherever she may be, would, at this juncture, remove her spectacles, dab at her eyes with a handkerchief and allow herself a fleeting smile of relief.

#### Reference

All in the Mind – A Farewell to God, by Ludovic Kennedy

*John Nixon is a professional engineer living in West Vancouver. Most of his career has been devoted to consulting engineering in mining and metallurgy. He holds a B.Eng. degree from McGill University and an MBA from York University.*

***52% agreed that  
“religious beliefs  
promote intolerance,  
exacerbate ethnic  
divisions and impede  
social progress”***