

# QUADRANT

## Turnbull's Islamic Howlers

Agility and innovation? The PM's version of history is all that and more. Leaping facts in a single bound, he ducks and weaves through a thicket of politically correct clichés to land effortlessly upon the desired conclusion: the West owes everything to Mohammad.

**Back in 2011, on 28 February, Malcolm Turnbull, now Australia's Prime Minister, had [this to say about Islam on Q&A](#):**

*Islam is an ancient religion, of great scholarship. I mean — for heaven's sake — much of our learning and culture came to us from the Muslims, just like, you know, our whole system of numbers and much of the learning of the ancient Greeks only survived because of the Arab scholars and the Islamic scholars.*

*So, you know, the idea that Islam is antithetical to learning or culture or scholarship is absurd. Now, you know, it's a great tradition. It is important for us that we promote and encourage Islam and Islamic traditions which are moderate, which support freedom, which support democracy and which support Australian values — not in the sense of "Aussie values" — but in the sense of democracy, rule of law, tolerance, freedom. That's what we're talking about and they are universal values.*

Turnbull made this statement in order to dismiss a suggestion he considered absurd, namely that Islamic schools in Australia promote extremism. He intended the argument he put forward to be evidence for the inherent moderation of Islam.

The idea that Western people should feel indebted to Islam for keeping Greek and Hindu learning alive is common enough. But does it make any sense at all?

Consider the case of the Hindu number system. Muslim conquests of the Indian subcontinent commenced in the 7th century and, by the early 9th century, Muslim scholars had learned about the Hindu numbering system and adopted it. Use of the system then spread rapidly across the Arab world, and by the early 10th century it had reached Spain.

The Hindus were quite capable of preserving their intellectual achievements without the dubious benefits of Islamic conquest. Indeed Hindu societies have preserved the use of the number system they invented right down to the present day.

The fact that this excellent system passed into Europe via Arab colonies stretching around the Mediterranean cannot justify a claim that the Hindu system of numbers ‘only survived’ because of Muslims or Islam. Nor does it imply that the Arabs who passed on this numbering system to the West were – to use Turnbull’s words — ‘moderate’ or supportive of freedom and democracy. It is not possible to work out whether a society is moderate from the numbering system it uses. Even the Islamic State uses the same numbering system as Malcolm Turnbull.

Concerning Greek learning I had this to say in my book, [The Third Choice: Islam, Dhimmitude and Freedom](#):

*A repeated theme in ... school texts is that the West should be grateful to Islamic civilization for preserving Greek philosophy. The narrative offered to justify this gratitude is that during the Dark Ages the Islamic world underwent a golden age of cultural and scientific development, preserving Greek learning, which then kick-started the Western Renaissance.*

Greek civilization did not need ‘rescue-by-conquest’: indeed it continued in Constantinople all through the European dark ages. It is true that when the Europeans translated Arabic texts into Latin, this did stimulate the development of Western philosophy and science. Many terms passed over from Arabic into European languages as a result, including sherbet, zero and zenith. However the fact that elements of Greek philosophy and science were transmitted to Europe via Arabic was not something for which Western children should be schooled to feel grateful. If Arab conquest had never happened, we can assume that Greek culture and philosophy would have continued to develop in Alexandria, Damascus and Constantinople to the present day.

In reality, as A.C. Crombie pointed out in *Augustine to Galileo*, the conquest of the heart of the Greek-speaking world by Islam, and resulting Arab control of the Mediterranean, stunted scientific progress in Europe:

*... it was the eruption of the Mohammedan invaders into the Eastern Empire in the 7th century that gave the most serious blow to learning in Western Christendom. The conquest of much of the Eastern Empire by the Arabs meant that the main reservoir of Greek learning was cut off from Western scholars for centuries ...*

Islam’s disruption of Mediterranean civilization ushered in the so-called European ‘Dark Ages’, as historian Henri Pirenne concluded in his classic study, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*:

*The cause of the break with the tradition of antiquity was the rapid and unexpected advance of Islam. The result of this advance was the final separation of East from West, and the end of the Mediterranean unity. ... The Western Mediterranean, having become a Musulman lake, was no longer the thoroughfare of commerce and of thought which it had always been. The West was blockaded and forced to live upon its own resources.*

It is disappointing that today history books are teaching a dhimmified version of history, according to which children are schooled in feeling grateful to Islam for rescuing Western and Christian culture from Islam itself. This is exactly the dhimmi condition, and the essential meaning of the jizya payment ritual: to render gratitude to Islam for being rescued by conquest.

Malcolm Turnbull's comment on *Q&A* illustrates the hole the West is falling into. It risks being buried alive by the weight of bad ideas about its own identity and history.

In the face of escalating Islamic terrorism, it is reasonable to inquire into the contribution schooling may or may not make to the ideological formation of jihadis. However, the way to make that inquiry is by examining what people are saying and doing today, not by making grandiose appeals to a mythical history.

To learn from history is wisdom. To abuse it is folly indeed.