



An extremely confusing week

IT'S BEEN A BEWILDERING WEEK. Like most people I know, I haven't the foggiest idea about what's likely to happen to share prices or to the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The 'defenders' of Goma set about robbing and killing refugees and residents alike. While I spent the week safely waiting on tenterhooks for the election of Barack Obama and the chance to see *Quantum of Solace*. Finally on Friday I watched a gadgetless James Bond and his girl engage in a bewildering meditation on death and revenge that appeared to have been put together by Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky. Gravitas and anti-corporate roughhouse, a villain unaccountably posing as an environmentalist, and the usual bloody explosive concatenations, minus the supercilious banter and the lascivious sex. Daniel Craig *is* 007, but not as we've known him.

As if all this wasn't bad enough the Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand palaver went on and on, pleasing only George Osborne, whose yachting shenanigans were driven from the front pages. If this is the best we can do for scandals it doesn't say very much for the country. We used to be the envy of the world when it came to sleaze in high places, now we must rank only fourteenth, maybe fifteenth, in the *scandalgate* stakes. There's no actual sex, no cash in brown envelopes, no ministerial resignations, "no moments of madness", no

wives *standing by* their errant husbands, just dirty talk and idle speculation.

All this was compounded on Saturday morning when I opened my copy of the *Financial Times*. Just imagine my horror when my eyes fell upon an editorial chastising the rich for being insensitive! “What is happening?” I thought: James Bond’s become a humourless radical, our scandals have become worthless, and now the *Financial Times* is competing with the *Socialist Worker* in its attacks upon inequality, the ostentation of the rich and the callous insouciance of the plutocracy.

What had particularly annoyed the editors of the *FT* was the announcement by the Kazkommertsbank of Kazakhstan of their new MasterCard. Laced with gold, the card is known as the “Diamond” and not unreasonably has an actual diamond embedded in its centre and a credit limit of \$50,000. MasterCard have decorated this offering with a peacock or a winged horse, according to gender or taste. “Unappealing extravagance” *harrumphs* the *FT* – this from a newspaper which calls its luxury consumer magazine, “*how to spend it*” which it publishes on the back of advertisements for five-thousand-dollar watches and gowns costing oodles and oodles. Unfortunately, this has not stopped the *FT* joining the ranks of those calling for moral rearmament, parsimony and cheeseparing. Confusing eh?

However, none of this quite matched up to the perplexing story of the socialist playwright and the Muslim Council of Britain. David Edgar, the playwright in question is a lifelong socialist, scourge of the Tories and doughty anti-fascist. He is a radical artist. A person committed, since at least the mid seventies of the last century to putting the angst, the conundrums, the paradoxes and the perplexities that have beset the left over the last thirty-five years into dramatic form. More recently, however, he appears to have teamed up with the Muslim Council of Britain to make the case for Islam.

Scornful of the government's attempts to combat violent Islamists he wants to build up a positive image of Islam with reference to the activities of the MCB, the British Muslim Initiative, Tariq Ramadan and Respect councillor, Salma Yaqoob. In the course of his efforts David Edgar is at pains to discover nothing less than a full-blown "Reformation" taking place in Europe with Sayyid Qutb, the martyr of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, standing in for Martin Luther. He argues this because of Sayyid Qutb's well-known desire to free Islam from cultural practices, which draw their authority not from the Quran, but from *pre-Islamic* cultural practices. Similarly, Qutb's outlook rejects the authority of laws that exist "outside God's religion" – he rejects any state, which has "usurped the authority of God".

David Edgar is arguing that despite strictures worthy of Girolamo Savonarola, Qutb seminal work, *Mal'alim fil al-Tariq* (or *Milestones*) is the basis for a new accommodation with Western society in which Muslims are seeking to establish a place for themselves and their religion. Edgar argues that because Qutb advocated a return to the Quran and sought to free Islam from centuries of cultural encrustation and misdirection by leaders hostile to God's purposes or woefully ignorant of the true meaning of the Quran, the Sharia and the Hadith, he created a space for a pluralistic Islam.

David Edgar is pleased by the participation of prominent Muslims like Anas Altikriti of the British Muslim Initiative in the Stop the War Coalition. He gets a buzz from the idea of Muslims from the MCB and other organizations allying themselves with socialists in an apparent expression of support for democratic causes. He enthuses that the MCB has now lifted its boycott of Holocaust Day and accepts that it was wrong to burn copies of Salman Rushdie's novel, *Satanic Verses*, or to call for the book to be banned.

This is indeed progress of a sort. But is it the sort of progress that is sufficient to enable a radical socialist to endorse what David Edgar is now calling the

“preaching of pluralism”? In what sense is it pluralistic to call upon people not to read a novel because you disagree with it? The latest book to be denounced is the novel, *The Jewel of Medina*. The MCB asserts that Sherry Jones wrote it in order to demean Aishah, one of the wives of the Prophet: “Many of us will feel strongly at the purported character assassination of Aishah (may Allah be pleased with her), the Prophet's beloved wife and mother of the faithful.”

These are weasel words in the context of a campaign of death threats and bombings aimed at Sherry Jones and her publishers. It is truly bewildering that a leading socialist dramatist wants to associate himself with people who denounce books they haven't read because they suppose that they might contradict their interpretation of ancient religious texts or lore.

David Edgar surely knows that his Muslim allies are opposed to the right of those ‘born into the faith’ to leave it on pain of death or profound social ostracism, he knows that they are Creationists opposed to the theory of natural selection, and he knows that they regard homosexuality as entirely unacceptable because it is a sin. Sayyid Qutb, in common with Giralamo Savonarola and Martin Luther, was a profoundly intolerant man. To claim him either as a friend, or merely as a *catalyst* of pluralism, is perverse in the extreme. In fact, in common with Orthodox Jews and conservative Christians, these friends of David Edgar are the enemies of just about everything he is supposed to stand for.

Confusing eh?