

Aliaa Magda Elmahdy is a hero...

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Aliaa Magda Elmahdy is a hero...

And, if she doesn't leave Egypt soon, she may be killed.

Over the last decade we have seen brief and abortive attacks on the last monolithic religion - Islam. Whether it is a cartoon created in a European country or a film produced/directed by a descendant of Vincent Van Gogh (Theo), Islam (with its radical shock troops taking the blame, as always) threatens any criticism or 'attack' on Islam and Muhammad with violence, threats and murder. Yes, it may be a minority, just as the KKK was a 'minority' in the south during the pre-integration days, but the 'minority' of Islamic worshipers has hijacked a world religion and its public agenda. Maybe Islam is the religion of peace, but somehow it has become a structural vehicle for pathetic and sociopath tendencies.

It isn't to say there are no Christian, Jewish or other kinds of religious conservatives or reactionary crazies (there are many of these), but rather that these other institutions have been undermined and weakened by the progress of secular rights and secular spaces. It is important for the progress of civilization that these religious systems lost 'power' and ceded this power to ordinary people and secular systems of mediation and community. Many spaces have been expanded because of the denouement of religious power (primarily in the West). It began with political and scientific thought. However, if we are honest with ourselves, we also know that the day after the printing press was invented someone was producing pornography with it. Was the French revolution impacted by Voltaire, Montesquieu or the "Dirty Monk Attends the Estates General"?

Pornography, though often base and degrading, is a space for subversive ideas and the exploration of the boundaries of secular society. Pornography (though I still have a hard

time calling these pictures of this woman pornography) is a tool of political speech. Magda's use of her own body as a weapon is brave and important, but she is more likely to become a remembered martyr than a Rosa Parks (who survived past her battles). That's assuming she stays in Egypt.

"Freedom", wrote one detractor, "is not the same as degradation and prostitution." This is a quote from a NYT article discussing the Egyptian response to her act. But this comment is flawed. Freedom has NO MEANING unless it is the freedom to do that which is not acceptable. This is not to say freedom is anarchy (it is not). Freedom must be limited, to the extent that my acts (or Magda's) impact the lives of others in some real and material way. However, the freedom to think, to express, to create and to keep the product of our own labor, are freedoms that must be allowed to grow and expand. Otherwise, what does it mean to have an 'open society' with speech codes and bans on nude photography?

If you are a minimally intelligent human, you can do what is easy and IS your right -- you can walk up to your computer, radio or TV and TURN IT OFF! No one is forced to navigate the web to Magda's facebook page. No one is forced to read her boy friend's rant. No one should be made to see or read something they don't want to (this is the inverse of a freedom, the freedom to ignore and avoid). We all have the power of censorship, where it should be, in our own free will and brain.

The worst part is that these photos are banal by comparison to the US porn industry and its online presence. These photos are not showing this young woman in some compliant or submissive position - she is standing, naked and proud. The negative response to these rather mundane photos shows how extreme and dangerously atavistic Egyptian political society is.

This woman has a right to her image.

This woman has a right to display her image and it is shameful that anyone would attack or threaten her for these actions.

And now, I suspect, her life is in danger. She may not know it yet (likely she does know), but it is.

I hope for her but frankly her next best move will probably be the life of the expatriate. As an American who values the 'abstract' part of our civic heritage and our basic rights, I would welcome her here, if she had to leave her home.

Egypt may not want women like her, but America has too few of them.