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Iran and the Tragedy of Bad Ideas

The lesson of 'The Stoning of Soraya M.'

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There are times when wrestling with the mysteries of storytelling can be revelatory. I recently saw the film "The Stoning of Soraya M.," and, as a professional storyteller, found myself puzzled by how compelling a tale it was.

Based on actual events recounted in a book by expatriate Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam, the movie tells of the brutal 1986 judicial murder of a woman falsely accused of adultery in the Islamic slave state of Iran. Having, as a woman, no right to defend herself, she was horrifically stoned to death in accordance with Shariah law -- one of an untold number of Iranian women to suffer such a fate.

It's a very well-made film, passionate, powerful and beautifully acted. But by rights, the story shouldn't work. The plot is too inevitable to qualify as a drama, and it is not concerned enough with individual character to rank as classical tragedy. It does derive some power from the sheer awfulness of its central event, but stories with nothing but awfulness to recommend them usually fail.

Yet this one grips you, haunts you -- and for a long time after I saw it, I couldn't figure out why.

The events now unfolding in Iran, some 23 years after Soraya's death, provide the answer. The movie's detailed and unflinching depiction of a world and a worldview make "The Stoning of Soraya M." a different kind of tragedy, what you might call a tragedy of culture or a tragedy of bad ideas.

The tragedy of bad ideas unfolds from a moral flaw in a worldview or philosophy as inevitably as classical tragedy unfolds from a flaw in individual character. Tragedies of bad ideas are the most common, pervasive and destructive man-made mass disasters. Yet our thinking class has become powerless to oppose them or even recognize them for what they are.

The reason is that too many of our intellectuals are themselves ensnared in a bad idea. That idea is multiculturalism -- the notion that no system or government is inherently better than any other, that the rules of morality are just a doctrine written by history's winners. Thus there are no enduring human truths, only "narratives" by which almost any

beastliness can be explained away if committed by a people with a claim to having been victimized by a dominant culture.

This bad idea has all but silenced our nation at a moment when the world most needs our voice. Thousands of people in Iran are marching in the streets, protesting a sham election, heroically risking life and limb to try to tear some little breathing space in the smothering shroud of theocracy. Yet President Barack Obama, the leader of the most powerful free nation on earth, responds with mealy-mouthed strategic dithering. The man who in his recent speech in Cairo drew an absurd moral equivalence between Western errors and Islam's unstinting history of oppression has condemned the Iranian government's violent reaction to the demonstrations but remains canny and vague in his support of the protestors.

This is too shrewd by half. There comes a time in the affairs of men when bad ideas can be -- and therefore must be -- powerfully opposed by good ones.

Compare, if you can bear it, President Ronald Reagan's response to the 1982 crackdown on the Polish union Solidarity by the Soviet Union: "The struggle in the world today for the hearts and minds of mankind is based on one simple question: Is man born to be free, or slave? In country after country, people have long known the answer to that question. We are free by divine right." In less than a decade, in startlingly large measure because this one idea found so mighty a voice, the Soviet Union was gone.

The "Stoning of Soraya M." is a compelling story because it puts into one life and death a nation's suffering -- a region's suffering -- in the snares of a philosophy antithetical to individual liberty. If this were a world of narratives instead of truths, that would be just one more narrative to pile on the others. In fact, it's a tragedy, as every heart must know.

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