

INTERVIEW

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Melanie Phillips on a World Gone Mad

The British author on Princess Diana, Barack Obama, Israel, and pathological projection.

Melanie Phillips, the British journalist, is author of *The World Turned Upside Down: The Global Battle over God, Truth, and Power*. As the title suggests, the book covers a lot of ground. Phillips touches on much of it in an interview with NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE's Kathryn Jean Lopez.

KATHRYN JEAN LOPEZ: What's notable about the current "apparent mass departure from rationality"?

MELANIE PHILLIPS: What I have found so striking is that, in this supposed age of reason, there is such an implacable refusal, over a wide and disparate range of issues, to acknowledge the authority of factual evidence over opinion, or distinguish truth from propaganda and lies, or differentiate between justice and injustice, victim and victimizer. More than that, this phenomenon is confined to the supposed custodians of reason, the intelligentsia; and some of the most prominent of these often-militant "rationalists" propound assertions that are demonstrably irrational.

Even more striking is that this repudiation of reason is associated with the most fashionable and progressive causes — anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, environmentalism, moral and cultural relativism, multiculturalism, scientism. Yet they promote not just irrationality but a return to primitivism, pre-modern levels of social disorder, and the persecution of dissenters.

LOPEZ: What does a self-described “agnostic” care about God?

PHILLIPS: You don't have to be a religious believer to understand that if religion — more specifically, the Hebrew Bible and the Christianity that built upon it — underpins Western civilization and the codes of right and wrong — putting others above yourself, freedom and equality, and belief in reason — that form the bedrock of that civilization, then eroding or destroying that religion will erode or destroy those virtues and the civilization they distinguish.

LOPEZ: You write that progressives, Islamists, environmentalists, fascists, militant atheists, and religious fanatics are “united by a common desire to bring about through human agency the perfection of the world.” Is this becoming more apparent?

PHILLIPS: It may seem strange to lump all these ideologies together since they are all so different. But, when you look at them, it is immediately apparent that they are all at root utopian, millenarian visions of the perfection of the world through human agency — the age-old recipe for totalitarian terror. The idea that fascism is in a wholly different place from the Left is in my view quite misplaced: Although conventionally one is described as “right” and the other as “left,” this is historically and philosophically inaccurate; they share common roots in the repudiation of individual reason and liberty.

One of the mysteries of the age is the way “progressives” who fetishize sexual freedom, gay rights, female equality, and the like march shoulder to shoulder with Islamists who stone adulterers, kill gays, and subjugate women. They share a common desire to destroy the cultural traditions and normative values of the West — all in the cause of creating the perfect society, which creates in turn a totalitarian mindset, which links religious fanatics and the political tyrannies of both Communism and fascism.

To some of us, this is very apparent — but many who are in the grip of these delusions are frighteningly incapable of understanding what it is that they don't understand.

LOPEZ: Why do you put the word “progressives” in quotation marks?

PHILLIPS: Glad you asked that! Because there’s nothing progressive about the totalitarian fanatics of the Left, even though they claim that label for themselves. One of our biggest problems is the hijacking of language by the Left, which has turned words such as “liberal,” “tolerant,” and “progressive” into their very opposites. I do believe in being progressive in the true sense — the authentic, classical-liberal goal of creating a better society by encouraging the good and discouraging the bad. But to achieve that, we have to reclaim the language of social progress for its true meaning, which is based on a proper differentiation between right and wrong, truth and lies, justice and injustice. Until we do that, we allow ourselves to be co-opted into the discourse of moral and intellectual inversion, and we allow the lunatics to run the asylum.

I do hope that this language is not politically incorrect.

LOPEZ: Are there really a hundred thousand practicing pagans in Britain today? There’s a Pagan Police Association?

PHILLIPS: Yup! It’s testimony, is it not, to the rich diversity of diversity in Britain? We all have to keep straight faces while our police officers take official leave to dance naked ’round a pile of stones.

LOPEZ: So Islam is not London’s only religion problem.

PHILLIPS: The real problem in Britain is not Islam but the vacuum in British culture which Islam is opportunistically attempting to fill. That vacuum has been caused by the retreat and surrender of the Christian church under the tide of secularism and aggressive atheism. This has opened the door not to an age of reason but to an epidemic of paganism — environmentalism, or worship of the earth, is the most conspicuous example, but there’s lots of other absurd stuff, too, such as seances, crystals, astrology, and the like. The Islamization of Britain is only taking place because the spiritual playing field has been abandoned to hyper-individualism and irrationality. The U.S. isn’t immune to this madness by the way — just look at Madonna and “Kabbalah” (not).

LOPEZ: How is “Londonistan” faring? Any better? Any worse?

PHILLIPS: Better in the narrow but obviously highly important sense that our security people have picked up on and stopped so many Islamist plots against Britain. But just as bad, or even worse, in the degree to which the political and security establishments *still* refuse to acknowledge that Britain and the West are the victims of a religious war, an Islamic jihad. They refuse to use the terms “Islamic extremism” or “Islamic terrorism.” Sound familiar?

Worse, they believe that the Muslim Brotherhood — who are the spiritual fathers of al-Qaeda and Hamas amongst others, and whose aim is to reestablish the medieval Islamic caliphate and conquer the world for Islam — are just a bunch of harmless religious nuts who can be used to divert impressionable young British Muslims *away* from terror. So they actually employ such Islamic extremists in government — as advisers *against* Islamic extremism. They are doing nothing to halt the advance of a parallel sharia jurisdiction and are even welcoming sharia finance. Only people who have lost touch with rationality in general can be so blind, surely.

LOPEZ: Why does Princess Diana remain an important cultural case study?

PHILLIPS: The hysteria over Princess Diana was a spectacular example of the tendency towards psychological projection, in which the public projects its deepest fears and fantasies onto a public figure who is held to transcend disadvantage. At its worst, this process makes the celebrity into a kind of sainted figure. A similar kind of pathological projection took Barack Obama into the White House.

LOPEZ: Tell me about “kitsch emotion,” what it is, and why it’s important to recognize.

PHILLIPS: Kitsch emotion replaces real feelings, such as love or grief, with a sentimentalized pastiche that is, at root, all about making the person feel good about himself. Thus, as with the death of Diana, people advertise their moral worth with open displays of grief over someone they only knew as a media construct; emotional restraint is seen not as an admirable stoicism but as evidence of callousness.

These are emotions for a narcissistic age; they are all about the self, not about looking out for other people. It’s important to recognize this so that we can distinguish them from the real thing

— which otherwise will become confused and may be lost altogether, along with our concern for others and our whole understanding of the difference between what is true and what is false.

LOPEZ: How can Britain be “post-religious” when religion seems to be an issue there?

PHILLIPS: It’s post-Christian, to be more precise; in other words, the indigenous population has turned away from faith in and adherence to the doctrines and moral precepts of the religion that underpins British society. By comparison with the U.S., Britain is pretty godless.

LOPEZ: “People didn’t want to hear about the anti-white, anti-Western church to which he had belonged for twenty years, nor about his questionable associations with people in Chicago’s corrupt political machine, nor about his friendships with and tutelage by anti-Western radicals.” Is this at the heart of so many problems? People simply don’t want to know?

PHILLIPS: Yes, it’s human nature, unfortunately, to hide heads in sand and hope unpleasant things will just go away. But what’s so alarming now is the extent to which people are allowing emotionalism and wishful fantasies to delude them, especially at such a dangerous juncture for the world. The way in which the American public refused to acknowledge the evidence of Obama’s radical background and thus elected an anti-Western radical to the White House was indeed a conspicuous example of this flight from reality.

LOPEZ: Has the public fully appreciated the significance of the Climate Research Unit fraud?

PHILLIPS: One of the striking aspects of mass ideological delusion is a refusal to acknowledge even the clearest evidence of the intellectual and moral corruption at its core. The gerrymandering of scientific evidence by the East Anglia Climate Research Unit, in order to uphold the theory of anthropogenic global warming in the face of evidence that the earth was not warming at all, has been pushed aside as either an artificially created uproar or, at worst, an error of judgment by one hard-pressed scientist.

It was far worse than that, of course, because the various scientists involved had been for years absolutely central to the promulgation of AGW theory; and what the leaked emails revealed was their instinctive impulse to wrench the facts to fit their prior assumptions. Most chilling of all was their unshakeable certainty that they had a duty thus to wrench that evidence — in order to

demonstrate the truth of the theory, because it was simply impossible that there could be evidence to the contrary.

What was also glossed over or missed altogether in the uproar over East Anglia was that AGW theory has been sustained on the back of one scientific fraud or sloppy and flawed research exercise after another. Yet astonishingly, it is still being promoted quite shamelessly by those for whom there can simply be no contradiction to the theory, and who thus project in turn all the falsehoods and frauds onto the skeptic side of the argument. It is surely the biggest exercise in totalitarian thought-reversal and reality-denial since Stalinism.

LOPEZ: If it is “demonstrably untrue” that “Bush lied, people died,” how has it taken root so deeply?

PHILLIPS: Through the refusal of a highly ideological media — composed of visceral Bush-haters, Israel-bashers, and transnational “progressives” — to report what was actually out there in terms of evidence or even follow the elementary rules of logic on the related topics of the Iraq war they had overwhelmingly opposed and the Islamic jihad they blamed on Israel. As a result, simple facts, such as the reasons Bush or Blair actually gave for the war or what the Iraq Survey Group actually found, were airbrushed out of the debate, and history was effectively rewritten — with virtually no dissent allowed.

LOPEZ: What is scientific triumphalism? Does harping on it make you anti-science?

PHILLIPS: Scientific triumphalism is the belief that scientific materialism alone has the answers to all the questions in the universe. This causes science to overreach beyond its proper realm, seeking to explain what is explicable, into claiming to explain what is inexplicable, which is properly the realm of religion. The attempt to use materialism to explain what it cannot explain causes promoters of scientism to become irrational. So pointing this out is certainly not anti-science. It is against the perversion of science.

LOPEZ: Is there a secular inquisition?

PHILLIPS: Yes. By that, I mean that secular ideologies such as environmentalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, scientism, moral relativism, multiculturalism, and so forth have a quasi-religious belief that they embody a revealed truth that cannot permit any challenge. And yet all these ideologies, which are militantly secular and which hold that religion is a source of irrationality and oppression, resemble to an uncanny degree the millenarian beliefs of Christianity in the Middle Ages and Islam through the ages; their dogmatic belief in a revealed truth of sin, guilt, and redemption caused heretics to be persecuted. Today, we have secular inquisitions in which heretics are also persecuted for expressing forbidden ideas that challenge the received assumption of “virtue”; thus we have the demonization of dissenters.

LOPEZ: What is the “Middle East Witch-Hunt”?

PHILLIPS: Medieval witch-hunts involved singling out certain women as scapegoats and then killing them for crimes of which they were innocent but of which they found themselves incapable of proving their innocence because the case against them was rigged. In Britain in particular, but also in parts of Europe and on American campuses (see the Mearsheimer/Walt calumny), there is an obsessive malice toward Israel which goes far beyond reasoned debate and has become a pathological scapegoating of a nation.

The treatment of Israel by the left-wing Western intelligentsia is unique in its irrationality and moral and historical inversion. It takes a nation that is the historic victim of aggression and blames it for jeopardizing peace in the region and causing Islamic extremism worldwide — despite demonstrable evidence that this is simply untrue. It accuses Israel, wholly falsely, of “apartheid” and ethnic cleansing when Israeli Arabs have full civil rights and the Palestinian population has increased many times over — and when Jews are excluded from parts of the Arab world (including the putative state of Palestine).

It takes a nation that has been under exterminatory attack for six decades (nine, if you include the Palestine Mandate) and insists that it make compromises with its attackers, even as they continue to attack it. And if any Jew dares protest at the manifest injustice, lies, and bigotry in this unique delegitimization, they find themselves accused of “dual loyalty” or being part of a covert global conspiracy to put the world at risk.

LOPEZ: With polls suggesting President Obama is hurting with Jewish voters, are there signs that Jewish voters may divorce themselves from the Left?

PHILLIPS: No; the world would surely stop turning on its axis were this to happen. More seriously, of course some may do so; and Orthodox Jews are already more inclined to vote Republican. But among liberal Jews, the most I would expect is a turning away from Obama — if even that — rather than a divorce from the Democratic party.

LOPEZ: Does the BBC hate Jews?

PHILLIPS: No, not Jews per se. The BBC simply embodies the world-view of the Left, which demonizes Israel and holds America responsible for Israel's behavior. Of course, you might say that is itself a form of Jew-hatred, but that is an argument that needs to be unpacked.

LOPEZ: What can be done about anti-Semitism in the West? Elsewhere?

PHILLIPS: Jew-hatred, as I prefer to call it, can surely never be eradicated. But the lies that currently fuel it — lies about Israel's behavior, the history of the Middle East, and so on — should be publicly confronted and exploded. Similarly, the ways in which the blood libels about the Jews pouring out of the Arab and Muslim worlds are poisoning minds not just in that world but in the West should also be prominently discussed, along with the continuity between the Arab/Palestinian agenda and that of the Nazis, whose allies they once were.

One of the main problems is the silence of Israel on this mass derangement in the West, and its failure to challenge it forensically and systematically. This has left an intellectual vacuum into which bigotry flows. While the irrationality of Jew-hatred cannot be defeated by reason, there are many in Britain and the West who are not natural bigots but are actually people of high-minded conscience, who have merely been indoctrinated with falsehoods about Israel that are never publicly challenged. Some of those people, at least, can certainly be reached by addressing their ignorance.

LOPEZ: Is relativism the problem? How do you combat it?

PHILLIPS: Relativism, or the belief that there is no hierarchy of values, not even truth over lies, is at the root of these problems. In my view, it is a product of aggressive secularism, and thus can only be addressed by a return to Judeo-Christian values and beliefs.

LOPEZ: What's so special about Britain? Why and how is it at the forefront?

PHILLIPS: Britain is particularly godless, as discussed above. It is thus furthest advanced in social, cultural, and moral breakdown, hugely exacerbated by the loss of its belief in itself as a nation and the demoralization — in every sense — that has followed from that. But as the parent of the English-speaking world, it still punches culturally far above its weight. Where it leads today, others will surely follow. And since Britain was first into the Enlightenment and is now first out, America and the rest of the West should be concerned.

LOPEZ: How close behind — or ahead — is the U.S.?

PHILLIPS: The U.S. is relatively well protected through Middle America, which is still overwhelmingly God-fearing and committed to the American nation and its particular values. But all the things I've been talking about are nevertheless steadily encroaching. The culture wars have been raging in the U.S. for decades now, and the universities are particularly porous to these noxious ideologies. And then there's Obama . . .

LOPEZ: Is the existence of the EU part of the problem?

PHILLIPS: The EU is the embodiment of the doctrine to which the Left now subscribes: “transnational progressivism,” or the belief that the nation is illegitimate and is trumped by supranational institutions and laws promoting the Brotherhood of Man through “universal” values. This is deeply anti-democratic and secularizing, standing against the particulars of creed or culture. So yes, the EU is both symptom and, partly, cause of this problem.

LOPEZ: What was the most alarming fact you learned during the course of writing your book?

PHILLIPS: The full extent of the persecution of dissidents from all these ideologies within the academy.

LOPEZ: What was the most consoling fact you learned during the course of writing *The World Turned Upside Down*?

PHILLIPS: That so many, many people throughout the West think as I do.

LOPEZ: If every reader took one action item from your book, what would you want it to be?

PHILLIPS: To make known the truth about the monstrous misrepresentation of Israel, the key and normative issue of our time from which so much else follows.

— *Kathryn Jean Lopez is editor-at-large of National Review Online.*