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**THE NEW MORAL ORDER AND RACISM IN SOUTH AFRICA POST 11 SEPTEMBER 2001**

By: Desmond Painter and Catriona Macleod  
Department of Psychology  
Rhodes University  
P O Box 7426  
East London  
5200

Tel: +27(43)7047036/7039

Fax: +27(43)7047107

E-mail: [d.painter@ru.ac.za](mailto:d.painter@ru.ac.za)

**Biographical information**

Catriona Macleod completed her undergraduate degree and PhD at the University of Natal and her HDE, Honours and Masters at the University of Cape Town. She has worked as a teacher, a Research Officer at the University of Witwatersrand, and a Senior Lecturer at the University of Zululand. She is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Psychology Department at Rhodes University (East London). She has published articles in the areas of adolescent reproduction, inclusive education and gender issues.

Desmond Painter is a Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Rhodes University (East London) in South Africa. He has completed a Masters degree in psychology at the University of Stellenbosch. His research interests include theoretical psychology, social psychology, theories of embodiment, as well as language and identity in post-apartheid South Africa. He has recently published papers on the discursive turn in social psychology and the role of the body in social life.

## **Abstract**

In this paper we argue that globalisation imposes on 'developing' countries more than an economic order; they find themselves with the moral imperative to align themselves with the West against its Others, increasingly portrayed as Islamic fundamentalists. The 11 September terror attacks in the United States of America have pushed this process to a new level, with the attacks represented as no less than a barbaric attack on 'civilisation'. Through an analysis of a newspaper article reporting on the disciplining of a Muslim woman in for wearing an Osama Bin Laden t-shirt to work in South Africa, we indicate how this moral representation of the 11 September events and the Islamic Other have unique local effects. In South Africa it creates yet more possibilities for racialising practices to continue without being framed in explicitly racial terms. We further reflect on the implications of these events, and the complex interplay of the global and the local they demonstrate, for critical psychology in South Africa.

11 September will no longer be merely a date. More than signifying the attacks on the two towers of World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C., this date signifies events that have happened and will continue to happen everywhere. Through its silence on the exact location of the terror attacks one is left without doubt that 11 September will be a moment in *world* history, not the history of the United States of America. US dominance in a globalising world in fact means that there is little difference between these.

This US domination of ideological representations is of course greatly assisted by the media. It was little less than uncanny the way people around the globe could literally watch on their screens the unfolding of the attacks, the search for bodies, the fear, the devastation. The coverage, of course, was also biased: world media is US media, and very soon an attack on America could be transformed into an attack on the West, or, as the constraints of post-colonial political correctness gave way to national pride, an attack on civilisation.

Critical psychologists and other researchers of discourse processes will have a field day in years to come studying the representations and rhetorical strategies of the major Western role players in the aftermath of 11 September. More interesting to us, however, is the way countries on the peripheries of these events, but still more and more dependent on the global economy, are forced into positions that will affect in unforeseen ways in their internal politics (in addition to their foreign relations). In this paper, then, we briefly examine how 11 September happened and continues to happen in one such country, South Africa. Through a brief discussion of the possible racialising effects of the construction of the Islamic world as Other, we will make some suggestions on the challenges facing critical psychologists in this country.

In many ways South Africa is peripheral to the whole conflict, and for both geographical and ideological reasons should not really be affected by it at all. South Africa is not an Islamic state, nor is it part of the G7 nations. Despite this, we are not simply drawn into the conflict as mere consumers of American news broadcasts. Our involvement is much deeper, and the effects for our country potentially more troubling than being swamped by yet more images of the distant suffering and daily lives of people in the US or, to a much lesser extent, people in Afghanistan. For example, one of the concrete repercussions of the 11 September events and its aftermath was a decline in our economy, with our currency consistently reaching new lows against the dominant Dollar for the past three months. Our marginality is therefore, in many respects, misleading. One could even go further, and say that in Derridean terms peripheral countries like South Africa form an absent trace essential to the functioning and meaning of the centre. What happens here, and how we (and the many other marginal countries in the world) respond to this conflict, will be essential to the maintenance of hegemonic representations of what is occurring.

In this regard we argue that South Africa, as a 'developing country', is not drawn into an economic order only. We are at the same time drawn into a moral order. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, communism and the Cold War, this moral order sets the West (as the epitome of what is civilised and good) up against a new Other, primarily Islamic fundamentalists (epitomising barbarity and evil). One of the great problems of this ideological development is that it shifts the focus away from issues around post-colonial exploitation of Third World countries and the reality of

Western economic interests, making these issues secondary to the more pressing defence of civilisation and the good.

Being drawn into this new moral order, however, means more than *economic* woes for South Africa. Apart from struggling against the West around the place of Third World countries and African debt in the global economy, South Africa is still struggling with a past of colonialism, racial oppression, and specifically apartheid policies. While the change from institutionalised racism to a democratic South Africa owed a lot to sustained moral critique from inside as well as outside the country, we argue that the moral order we have been describing above now may facilitate the casting of practices of racism in new frameworks. These frameworks are hard to detect and critique, precisely because they are bolstered by a seemingly legitimate global outrage against certain categories of people.

### **Religion and the racialisation of Islam in South Africa**

South Africa's history, as is well known, has been fractured in many ways, including along religious lines. The apartheid government treated Christianity as the state religion. For example, Christian National Education was the official pedagogic strategy and all learners in state schools were obliged to take Religious Instruction (based on the *Bible* only). Only those whose parents posted strong (religious) objections were exempted. In post-apartheid South Africa the constitution enshrines the right of individuals to practise religious freedom. The practice of (Christian) Religious Education appears to continue in most state schools, but, positively, public broadcasters are required to give equal airtime to all the dominant religions in South Africa.

Despite religious diversity and some conflicts around religion, race took precedence both in defining the Other and in struggling for freedom during the apartheid era. In the light of this, the position of the minority Muslim population is interesting. Concentrated mostly in the Western Cape province, Muslims have usually been classified as 'coloured'. This is in keeping with the racial nature of South African society under the apartheid government, and it is only in recent years that their faith has given Muslim people a special, and growingly problematic, position in society. It is no longer strange nowadays to hear people drawing distinctions between 'coloured' people who are Christian and those who are Muslim. This growing public awareness of and concern about Islam as a religious identity (creating a distinct group with their own interests and global links) accelerated during the mid- to late-1990s, especially in response to the founding of the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) in response to gang- and drug-related activities on the Cape Flats. While initially embraced as a community-based response to crime, PAGAD soon became suspected of fundamentalist religious agendas and blamed for various acts of vigilantism and terror attacks in the city of Cape Town. These terror attacks were often focussed on targets associated with the United States of America (e.g. Planet Hollywood). Thus, prior to 11 September, the process of Othering concerning the Islamic status of people (rather than, but also including, their racial identity) had already begun in South Africa, as was the case in the West.

What 11 September has done is to make possible a new discursive link between religion and old racial divisions in South Africa, creating a situation where religious

and racial Othering can feed off one another's logic. An intricate discursive space where practices of oppression can take on a seemingly moral posture takes shape, and racism, experienced and understood as immoral in the new South Africa, becomes hidden from view. To illustrate this we analyse an incident reported in the *Sunday Times*, 21 October 2001, in which a 'white' Muslim secretary was disciplined by her employer for wearing an Osama bin Laden t-shirt to work.

### **Racial and religious Othering**

The *Sunday Times* is a weekly paper that, though it bills itself as providing serious political analysis and commentary, is mostly known for its sensationalist stories. For example, the famous back page contains, *inter alia*, the latest Hollywood scandals. The incident referred to above was not reported in the *Mail & Guardian*, the other weekly paper (affiliated to the *Guardian*), which does in fact provide incisive political and social analyses. The article's appearance in the *Sunday Times* is related, we would suggest, to the exotic nature of the event and its potential to tantalise and/or infuriate the reader. Many people would have read the article, as the *Sunday Times* has a large circulation nation-wide, owing partially to its style and partially to its containing the largest Advertisements for Employment section in the country.

The following are extracts from the article:

#### **Extract 1**

Osama bin Laden T-shirt lands Muslim secretary in hot water (title).

#### **Extract 2**

A South African Muslim woman who wore an Osama bin Laden T-shirt to work was hauled before a disciplinary hearing this week because her boss said she had been inciting her colleagues (First sentence of the article).

#### **Extract 3**

'He shouted at me, "You're a white Afrikaner. How can you wear this shirt? How can you support these people?" And he walked out' (Emboldened excerpt in the body of the article – quote from Sumaya, the woman in question).

#### **Extract 4**

'It is company policy that political, racist or religious propaganda or material not be displayed at work' (Quote from Sumaya's 'boss').

#### **Extract 5**

'That she supports one of the warring parties is neither here nor there because Osama bin Laden is innocent until proven guilty' (Quote from spokesperson from the Freedom of Expression Institute).

In neither of Extract 1 or 2 (the first two bits of information made available to the reader) is the racial identity of the secretary revealed. The racialising nature of the incident (the reason why, we would argue, the events are considered newsworthy) is obscured in the interests of 'objective reporting'. In Extract 3, however, localised South African racial politics reveals itself. The signifiers 'white', 'Afrikaner' and 'these people' are mixed in ways fully understood by South Africans trained through years of racialised personal and public politics to read their significance. However, in the past, 'these people' would have signified the Other in terms of race only. Here (in the light of the new moral order in place before 11 September but solidified by the

events of that day) the reader is in no doubt that ‘these people’ intersects race and religion.

Various South African academics have traced how racialised politics take on new forms in post-apartheid South Africa (e.g. Dixon & Durrheim, in press; Durrheim & Dixon, in press; Foster, 1999; Macleod & Durrheim, in press). For example, culture and tradition are being used to perform the work previously achieved by racial classifications in apartheid times. What 11 September has added to racialised politics is religion, fuelled by the globalised threat of Islamic terror. Sumaya’s employer’s statement of outrage captures the new inter-weaving of racialised, religious and linguistic boundaries.

During apartheid, Afrikaner identity brought together cultural, linguistic, Christian and nationalist ideologies in a racialised form. There has been a move in recent years in more progressive Afrikaner circles to extend Afrikaner identity beyond racialised boundaries, including people formally called ‘coloured’ into the cultural, linguistic and nationalist agenda of Afrikanerdom. 11 September and its aftermath has created multiple fissures along race and religious grounds. ‘Coloured’ Christians remain within the fold of the new Afrikaner vision of the multi-cultural, liberal-humanist, Westernised society. ‘Coloured’ Muslims, however, are in danger of slipping across the divide to the darkness of the Other.

These fissures, although in some senses new, are also old, drawing as they do on established racialised boundaries. Thus the lines drawn around the intersection of race and religion gain solidity rapidly. It is this that allows for the shock of the employer (as well as for the newsworthiness of the article). A ‘white’ Muslim woman breaks racialised and religious boundaries and becomes the exoticised Other.

There are numerous other stories to tell about this incident. There is the gendered story. Sumaya is a secretary, a position virtually always held by women, a position with little formalised power in organisations. Furthermore, she has fractured the patriarchal Afrikaner ideal of the obedient daughter. There is also the corporate story. Consider, for example, Extract 4. This statement implies that the social is privatised with the individual turning into a neutral corporate worker. However, this neutrality is misleading. It disguises the Westernised, capitalist values that saturate corporate business in South Africa. It is only Islamic Otherness (along with other forms of marginality) that is forced into the private. When this form of the private intrudes on the corporate, it renders it open to disciplining.

The writer of the newspaper article takes a human rights perspective on the incident. She calls on various experts to comment, including spokespeople from the Lawyers for Human Rights and the Freedom of Expression Institute. They agree that Sumaya’s right to freedom of expression has been infringed. The ‘rights’ discourse is a relatively new one in South Africa, given our brutal past. It has been taken up in many, sometimes contradictory, ways. It is intended in the newspaper article to provide an anti-bias stance. However, it also feeds off the same liberal-humanist base as the one that saw Sumaya being disciplined. Consider, for example, Extract 5. This statement implies that there is no space for Sumaya to express solidarity with Osama bin Laden if he is guilty. In other words, her freedom of expression or right of political choice is governed by the guilt (or not) of an individual. The privatisation of

certain forms of the social and the saturation of the public with Westernised capitalist values (equated as they are, post 11 September, with ‘civilisation’) means that it is not possible to see the West as evil, or to see Bin Laden’s cause as righteous or justified.

### **Critical psychology in South Africa post 11 September**

We turn finally to some of the roles of and challenges to critical psychology in South Africa with reference to the events and aftermath of 11 September. For critical psychology 11 September is important because it demonstrated so dramatically that globalisation is not simply a benign and natural development in an independent realm of economic regularities. Globalisation forces one into moral choices and implies real and symbolic violence on those who won’t define themselves in Western terms. This is true for psychology as well, where our (as South Africans) participation in global discussions and debates will also be structured and constrained by the hidden locations of methods, theories and concepts.

We contend that critical psychology in South Africa should, as a first step, locate itself strongly against the hidden hands of history, the market or science. Critical psychology itself should not be imported in reified ways, but continuously brought into dialogue with local concerns and insights (Durrheim, 2001; Painter & Theron 2001; Terre Blanche, 1998; Van Staden, 1998). Dialogue, of course, is vital. Taking our locality seriously doesn’t mean we should isolate ourselves within nationalist or purely regional agendas. 11 September has also demonstrated, in fact, that such isolation is not feasible.

Secondly, we have argued that events in the Third World or ‘developing’ countries are more than mere effects of those that happen in the West. They are dynamic responses that take on unique local forms. More than this, we have suggested that the ‘developing’ world functions as ‘absent trace’ that permeate Western reason and feed Western privilege (and, nowadays, Western fear). The task of critical psychology is, at the very least, to make these absent traces visible. For this task, critical psychologists in peripheral places like South Africa are uniquely positioned.

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