

Lessons of the South Asian Swastika

When he was living in Burma, graphic novelist Guy Delisle noticed quite a few swastikas. Indeed, much of south Asia is full of swastikas. It's not because they're Nazi sympathizers. The swastika was a south Asian symbol until the Nazis ripped them off.

Now imagine you're visiting south Asia and see a group of natives strolling around in swastikas. How should you react – and what should you do? There are two main routes.

Route #1: After a swift negative visceral reaction, you remind yourself that they're not Nazis and mean no offense. So you calm down and keep your complaints to yourself. Eventually, you hedonically adapt: swastikas stop bothering you, and the swastika-wearers live in happy ignorance of your initial offense.

Route #2: You allow your swift negative visceral reaction to blossom into seething resentment. Even if they're not Nazis, they're negligently hurting your feelings. With anger as your muse, you shame the swastika-wearers: "Do you people have any idea how *offensive* that is?!" In all likelihood, they'll be taken aback. After all, you're just a stranger freaking out over a symbol they enjoy wearing. Maybe they'll go out of their way to defy you. But even if you successfully shame them into burning all their swastikas, you had to badly upset a bunch of people who meant you no harm in order to get your way.

Which is the better route? It's partly a numbers game. If there are a million Holocaust survivors and one oblivious swastika-wearing south Asian, expressing a little anger goes a long way. The complainer feels extra anger and the target feels extra shame, but 999,999 people have a more pleasant day.

If the numbers are more evenly matched, however, Route #1 is clearly superior. Why? Because it is a less circuitous, more reliable route to social harmony. In Route #1, people who take offense quietly calm themselves. In Route #2, people who take offense give into anger, which inspires conflict with the accused, who in turn feel some combination of sad and angry. If the sadness dominates, they probably stop; if the anger prevails, they probably escalate.

Couldn't you say the same about murder? Absolutely not. Murder is intrinsically bad. Swastika-wearing, in contrast, is only bad because it's currently a *symbol* of intrinsically bad things (like murder). We can easily imagine a world where the swastika is a symbol of maternal love. But we can't imagine a world where murder is good.

So what? Especially on social media, I often encounter people who decry novel offensive symbols and promote Route #2 as the appropriate response. I hereby urge them to reconsider. Yes, we have a few symbols closely identified with heinous evils: swastikas,

klan outfits, blackface, the hammer-and-sickle. Since almost everyone in our culture who brandishes these symbols intends to insult innocent people, flipping out at those who so brandish has little collateral damage. But if a symbol is not yet closely identified with heinous evil, we should strive to not only leave well enough alone, but *deescalate*. Indeed, in the best of all possible symbolic worlds, fans of heinous evils would have no well-understood symbols to concisely express themselves. They'd have to spell it all out in longhand.

As usual, I'm not saying this to favor any prominent political faction. If you want to "raise awareness" about offensive Halloween costumes, you should stop. The same goes if you want to rally fellow patriots against football players who take the knee during the national anthem. If a symbol is ambiguous – as it almost always is – fomenting anger is just childish. But the other side won't extend you the same courtesy? Take comfort in the fact that anger is its own punishment – and be the change you want to see in the world.