



# Captive turns to Islam

Walking into Eden Terrace's Gandhi Hall, I'm surprised at the magnitude of this Islamic reverie. Expecting a tiny group of 40 something supporters I'm astounded to find an audience of almost a thousand.

Those present range from hijab-wearing women and numerous bearded males to spectacled academics and theologians.

The number of Westerners is at first surprising, although the spectacle of a former tabloid journalist's conversion to Islam is quite unusual.

The evening begins in hushed tones with a traditional prayer, sung from the *Koran*.

Then in a quiet moment, the head of ceremonies details the emergency exit

**Yvonne Ridley was caught by the Taliban and held captive for ten days. Now a convert to Islam, she is touring the world to promote her new religion.**

**JOHN ASPDEN caught up with her in Auckland and found her story a little hard to swallow.**

procedure to the tense audience. Everyone is aware of the recent spate of attacks on central Auckland mosques following the London bombings and no one wants a repeat.

Yvonne Ridley can clearly be seen on stage in her traditional Islamic garb. The hijab-wearing convert looks an awkward mish-mash of East meets West; her face,

caked in make-up, bakes under the glowing stage lights.

The speaker reads her achievements to the audience.

Ridley currently works for the Islam Satellite Channel and is "the proud editor of a weekly column in New York".

Among a host of other achievements, her experience at the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Mirror* are noted, although her more recent career in tabloid journalism is conspicuously overlooked.

She begins with an explanation of her visit - to reverse media misconceptions of Islam, especially to dispel the "Western notion" that women are subordinated by the religion.

However, strip away the religious veil and Ridley's New Zealand tour seems little more than a glorified book tour, to publicise her latest work, *In the hands of the Taliban*.

"I'm not Islam's answer to Billy Graham," she says, reassuring non-Muslim audience members.

She delivers a disjointed history of her life before Islam in England's north-east.

The thrice-married mother of one details an illustrious career, late-night escapades, overwork and heavy drinking.

In her shrill northern accent, she tells of frivolous evenings in bars and meetings with men in luxurious restaurants.

However in 2003 all that changed, she says, when she vowed to live her life as a Muslim.

Over the next two hours, Ridley languidly relates the story of her dispatch to Afghanistan and eventual capture by Taliban forces while attempting to smuggle herself across the Pakistani border.

On September 11, 2001, she was sent to Heathrow Airport to catch the next available flight to New York.

Finding that all flights to the US were cancelled her editors decided to send her to the Pakistani capital Islamabad, where she was to gain passage into neighbouring Afghanistan.

After failing to gain a visa, Ridley decided to cross the border into Afghanistan, disguised in a full face covering burqa.

A short time later the Pakistani border closed and Taliban leaders declared anyone found helping a Westerner was to be executed.

Attempting to cross back into Pakistan via an illegal smuggling route, she was caught by the Taliban.

For the next 10 days, Ridley was held

captive in a Taliban jail. Two and a half years after being interrogated by the Taliban as a suspected US spy, she took an oath to live the rest of her life as a Muslim.

On the surface, her story looks a sincere testimonial. It is at times hysterical, uplifting and even heart-warming.

A comical story of her capture is one such high point. The pious Taliban border guards were unable to search her, fearing temptation from her foreign female body.

Desperate to prove she had no weapons, Ridley lifted her cloak to reveal her "flappy knickers" and at the sight of her body her Taliban captors ran away in horror.

A thought dawned on Ridley. America needn't send hundreds of cruise missiles to defeat Afghanistan. They need only shower the country with pictures of naked women to bring the country into submission, she says.

While on the surface her story appears an entertaining tale, a closer look reveals inconsistencies in her depiction of Taliban clerics.

She describes head Taliban cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri as "quite sweet", stating he had merely received a bad press.

However she washes over the minor detail of being lied to by al-Masri, who promised her release but merely moved her to a new jail.

When she was released, she showed little empathy with the Christian missionaries who befriended her during her incarceration.

During her speech, Ridley labours over the Taliban's fair treatment of women but when her saccharine description is challenged by an Afghan refugee, she fails to give a convincing answer.

Instead, she dwells on her "flappy knickers" and the "amazing green eyes" of her Taliban captors but fails to mention the fate of her Pakistani guides, who after being caught with a Westerner were likely to have faced execution.

BBC commentators have suggested she is a victim of Stockholm Syndrome, an anxiety disorder where hostages become sympathetic to their captors.

She certainly shows sympathy for the Taliban, lamenting the West's treatment of the regime.

"Everything in Afghanistan is ripped and torn. What we've given the Afghan people is drugs and porn and I'm sure they've got the rock and roll as well!" she says to the now euphoric crowd, barely able to contain their enthusiasm.

When asked about terrorism in the Middle East, Ridley replies: "It's very easy to spot a terrorist. There were eight of them in Scotland last week."

In the end, Ridley's colourful fray in the desert is an enthralling story, if it's at all possible to ignore her dumping by both mainstream media and Arab global news network al-Jazeera.

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- 'A'**

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