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FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2004

Cat Stevens: Stop Laughing

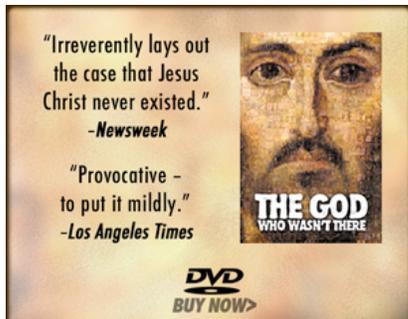
by Michael in New York on 9/24/2004 02:38:00 AM

Okay, the story of Cat Stevens -- now known as Yusef Islam -- was a funny bit of filler. The one-time singer of "Peace Train" has at times been reported to support the fatwa against Salman Rushdie (Islam later said he was misquoted) and now the US accuses him of donating money to Hamas and other terrorist groups. So rightly or wrongly he's barred from the US. When he boards a flight headed here, the plane is diverted to a US city, Islam is interviewed and sent back to the UK. Homeland folk try to blame the airline for letting him in; the airline says Islam's name wasn't on the lists they've been given to check. (It's the old problem of multiple spellings for names translated from a foreign tongue.)

But what does this incident say about the safety of our airports and our screening of shadowy international terrorists? It says a lot and none of it is good. We are trying to stop unknown individuals presumably donning false identities from getting into the US and causing havoc. But we can't even spot Cat Stevens, a world-famous rock star and arguably the most famous Western convert to the Islamic faith of the last thirty years! He's basically the Bono of the Islamic faith and he's been active performing music and being in the public eye quite a lot in the last five or so years, especially after 9-11. If we can't even catch him before he enters the country, how can we possibly expect to catch people who aren't world famous and written about regularly in People magazine?

Feel safer now?

P.S. Note to Homeland head Tom Ridge: Osama Bin Laden is also sometimes spelled Usama. You might want to check for that name too on flight lists. Just a thought.



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