A Tribute to Edward Said, Istanbul, May 25, 2007

On Blasphemy, Bigotry and the Politics of Culture Talk

By **Mahmood Mamdani**

In a book that I wrote in 2004 titled Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, I began with two propositions: that every culture, without exception, is historical; and that cultures do not grow in separate containers called civilizations. The claim that they should be seen as a part of an attempt to politicize culture, that is, to harness culture to a political project. My focus then was on the period that led to 9/11. My object will be to advance two further arguments. One, the continuing "clash of civilizations"- including its distinctive European version- is better understood not as a defense civilization but as the ideological arm of a larger political project, the War on Terror. And two, for those interested in developing an effective counter to hate movements organized as political projects, I suggest developing an intellectual and political, rather than a legal, strategy.

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This reflection focuses on the controversy around the Danish cartoons.

Those who followed the controversy over the Danish cartoons must have been struck by how fast issues moved from the question of free speech to that of defense of civilization. Both sides lined up, one in defense of a secular civilization, another in defense of a religious heritage. There were two curious effects about this particular contest. The first was a tendency for the government and the people, the right and the left, to stand together, on both sides, most unlike the tussle between government and people that we have come to expect of free speech contests.

The saga of the Danish cartoons resembled less a free speech festival than an opening salvo in a highly ideological and rapidly polarizing political contest with lines firmly drawn pitting, depending on your point of view, secular against religious, non-Muslim against Muslim, or simply the majority against a minority. The polarizing dynamic was testimony to an eroding middle ground. My interest in the Danish cartoons stems from the fact that it brings out most clearly the political challenge that is worth facing: how to reconstitute the middle ground, for no contest can be won without winning the middle-ground. My argument will be that the middle ground needs to be reconstituted conceptually, before it can be fought for politically. To explore that conceptual ground, I would like to begin by making a distinction between blasphemy and bigotry.

Blasphemy and Bigotry

When the Danish cartoon debate broke out, I was in Nigeria. If you stroll the streets of Kano, a Muslim-majority city in northern Nigeria, you will have no problem finding material caricaturing Christianity sold by street vendors. And if you go to the East of Nigeria, to Enugu for example, you will find a similar supply of materials caricaturing Islam. None of this is blasphemy; most of it is bigotry. That is the distinction I want to bring out. It is well known that the Danish paper, which published the offending cartoons, was earlier offered cartoons of Jesus Christ. However, the paper declined to print these on grounds that it would offend its Christian readers. Had the Danish paper published cartoons of Jesus Christ, that would have been blasphemy; the cartoons it did publish were evidence of bigotry, not blasphemy. Both blasphemy and bigotry belong to the larger tradition of free speech, but after a century of ethnic cleansing and genocide, we surely need to distinguish between the two strands of the same tradition. The language of contemporary politics makes that distinction by referring to bigotry as hate speech.

Just a few weeks after the Danish cartoons were published, the German writer Günter Grass was interviewed in a Portuguese weekly news magazine, *Visão.*[1] In that interview, Günter Grass said the Danish cartoons reminded him of anti-Semitic cartoons in a German magazine, *Der Stürmer*. The story was carried in a *New York Times* piece, which added that the publisher of *Der Stürmer* was tried at Nuremberg and executed. I am not really interested in how close was the similarity between the Danish and the German cartoons, but more so in why a magazine publisher would be executed for publishing cartoons. One of the subjects I work on is the Rwanda genocide. Many of you would know that the International Tribunal in Arusha has pinned criminal responsibility for the genocide not just on those who executed it but also on those who imagined it, including intellectuals, artists and journalists as in RTMC. The Rwandan trials are the latest to bring out the dark side, the underbelly, of free speech: its instrumentalization to frame a minority and present it for target practice.

We need to make a distinction between two kinds of bigotry, petty and grand. I characterize ethnocentrism, including discrimination against individuals, as petty bigotry. Grand bigotry, in contrast, is the stuff of demonization and the fuel of hate movements. It provides bricks and mortar for a hate ideology, which holds up caricatures, frames and targets a minority as responsible for what is wrong with the world. Contrast, for

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[1] *New York Times*, February 17, 2006, p. E7

example, individual racial discrimination with the organized racism of the Ku Klux Klan, or petty and grand apartheid in South Africa. Even when it comes to discrimination against entire groups, it is instructive to contrast anti-Semitism prior to the Nazis with Nazi anti-Semitism, which pointed to Jews as the explanation for what is wrong with the world.

Bigotry can be expressed in any language, religious or secular. The tendency to demonize one's enemies and to purify the world in one fell swoop has gone through a long historical development. The secular version forms a part of the history of ideology, where the language of demonization has been secularized as the language of race and of culture. The language of race has often – but not always – been distinguished from that of culture in the Western heartland, but the two languages have tended to be intermeshed in the colonies. This is the language of civilization, which originated with the Voyages of Discovery in the 15th century and led to the claim that colonialism itself was a civilizing mission.

Blasphemy and the Criticism of Religion

Bigotry, however, is not blasphemy. Blasphemy is the practice of questioning a tradition from the inside. In contrast, bigotry is an assault on that tradition from the outside. If blasphemy is an attempt to speak truth to power, bigotry is the reverse: an attempt by power to instrumentalize truth. A defining feature of the cartoon debate is that bigotry is being mistaken for blasphemy.

To understand why blasphemy was experienced as a liberating force, we need to historicize and particularize it. Blasphemy was aimed at the Church as an institutional power, which is why it is more of a European than an American tradition. Institutionalized religion in medieval Europe was organized as a form of hierarchical power, with an authority from the floor to the ceiling. Institutional Roman Catholicism has tended to mimic the institutional organization of the Roman Empire, just as the institutional organization of Protestant churches in Europe tend to resonate with the organization of power in the nation states of Europe.

Nevertheless, this tendency does not obtain in the United States of America. The puritan quest shifted the locus of individual morality from external constraint to internal discipline. This history displaced both the Pope and the Scriptures with inner conscience. The Christ of scriptures was to become the "Christ within," a doctrine pioneered by the Quakers.[2] Though blasphemy marked the moment of birth of the New World, the New World was not particularly receptive to blasphemy. The big change was political: Puritans and other Protestant denominations were organized more as congregations and sects, more like voluntary associations, than as hierarchical churches. Unlike in Europe, religion in the rapidly developing settler democracy in the United States was very much a part of the language of the American Revolution and of the public sphere. My point is that the European experience has to be seen as more the exception than the rule.

The European experience holds another lesson, one with perhaps greater relevance for the rest of us outside Europe. It is precisely in places like Europe, where the Church has a history of institutionalized power, that compromises have been worked out both to protect the practice of free speech and to circumscribe it through laws that criminalize blasphemy. When internalized as civility, rather than when imposed by public power, these compromises have been key to keeping social peace in divided societies. Let me give two examples to illustrate the point.

My first example dates back to 1967 when Britain's leading publishing house, Penguin, published an English addition of a book of cartoons by France's most acclaimed cartoonist, Siné. The Penguin edition was introduced by Malcolm Muggeridge. Siné's *Massacre* contained a number of anticlerical and blasphemous cartoons, some of them with a sexual theme. Many book sellers, who found the content

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[2] See, Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Penguin, 1975

offensive, conveyed their feelings to Allan Lane, who had by that time almost retired from Penguin. Though he was not a practicing Christian, Allen Lane took seriously the offense that this book seemed to cause to a number of his practicing Christian friends. Here is Richard Webster's account of what followed: "One night, soon after the book had been published, he went into Penguin's Harmondsworth warehouse with four accomplices, filled a trailer with all the remaining copies of the book, drove away and burnt them. The next day the Penguin trade department reported the book 'out of print'."[3] Now Britain has laws against blasphemy, but neither Allan Lane nor Penguin was taken to court. Britain's laws on blasphemy were not called into action. Two issues, in particular, interest me here. One, Allan Lane had internalized as civility what the law prescribed as externally enforced restraint. Second, since Allen Lane was not a practicing Christian, the best explanation I can give for his action is that he had actually internalized legal restraint as civility, meaning as conduct necessary to upholding peaceful coexistence in a society with a history of religious conflict. To put it differently, the existence of political society requires the forging of a political pact, a compromise. It is not as much the restraint imposed by laws that reflect the terms of this compromise, but their internalization as civility that is key to peaceful day-to-day social existence.

My second example is from the United States. It concerns a radio show called *Amos 'n Andy* that began on WMAQ in Chicago on 19 March 1928, and eventually became the longest running radio program in broadcast history. From one point of view, *Amos 'n Andy* could be said to be a white show for black people, a show conceived by two white actors who mimicked the so-called Negro dialect to portray two black characters, Amos Jones and Andy Brown. *Amos 'n Andy* was also the first major all-black show in mainstream U.S. entertainment. The longest running show in the history of radio broadcast in the U. S., *Amos 'n Andy* gradually moved from radio to TV. Graduating to prime time network television in 1951, it became a syndicated show after 1953.

Every year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) protested against the racist character of the portrayal that was the show. Giving seven reasons why the *Amos 'n Andy* show should be taken off the air, the NAACP said the show reinforced the prejudice that "Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest," that every character in the all-Black show "is either a clown or a crook." "Negro doctors are shown as quacks and thieves," Negro lawyers "as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics," and Negro women "as cackling, screaming shrews … just short of vulgarity." In sum, "all Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind." But CBS disagreed. You can still read the CBS point of view on the official *Amos 'n Andy* website which still hopes that Black people will learn to laugh at themselves: "Perhaps we will collectively learn to lighten up, not get so bent out of shape, and learn to laugh at ourselves a little more."[4]

The TV show ran for nearly 15 years, from 1951 to 1965. Every year the NAACP protested, but every year the show continued. Then, without explanation, CBS withdrew the show in 1965. What happened? In 1965 the Watts riots happened, and sparked the onset of a long, hot summer. The Watts riots were triggered by a petty incident, an encounter between a racist cop and a black motorist. That everyday incident triggered a riot that left 34 persons dead. Many asked: What is wrong with these people? How can the response be so disproportionate to the injury? After the riots the Johnson administration appointed a commission, called the Kerner Commission, to answer this and other questions. The Kerner Commission Report made a distinction between what it called the trigger and the fuel: the trigger was an incident of petty racism, but the fuel was provided by centuries of racism. The lesson was clear: the country needed to address the consequences of a history of racism, not just its latest manifestation. Bob Gibson, the St. Louis Cardinals pitcher, wrote about the Watts riots in his book *From Ghetto to Glory*. He compared the riots to a "brush back pitch" – a pitch thrown over the batter's head to

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[3] Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, p. 26

[4] http://www.amosandy.com/

keep him from crowding the plate, a way of sending a message that the pitcher needs more space.[5] CBS withdrew *Amos 'n Andy* after the long hot summer of 1965. The compelling argument that the NAACP and other civil rights groups could not make was made by the inarticulate rioters of Watts.

Why is this bit of history significant for us? CBS did not withdraw *Amos 'n Andy* because the law had changed, for no such change happened. The reason for the change was political, not legal. For sure, there was a change of consciousness, but that change was triggered by political developments. CBS had learnt civility; more likely, it was taught civility. CBS had learnt that there was a difference between black people laughing at themselves, and white people laughing at black people! It was like the difference between blasphemy and bigotry. That learning was part of a larger shift in American society, one that began with the Civil War and continued with the civil rights movement that followed the Second World War. This larger shift was the inclusion of African-Americans in a re-structured civil and political society. The saga of *Amos 'n Andy* turned out to be a milestone, not in the history of free speech, but in a larger history, that of black people's struggle to defend their human rights and their rights of citizenship in the U.S.

The Challenge is political, not legal

In the public discussion on the Danish cartoons, two options have been on offer: greater censorship and its opposite, total license. Both have problems.

Some point to censorship – to the example of Europe – where laws on blasphemy define the boundaries of free speech. The problem, according to this point of view, is that the laws reflect the cultural sensibility of particular countries in a particular historical period, so that blasphemy laws tend to protect the state religion

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[5] Cited in Robert Wright, "The Silent Treatment," *New York Times*, February 17, 2006, p. A 23

only, such as Anglicanism in England and Lutheranism in Denmark. Europe also has laws against certain forms of bigotry, particularly anti-Semitism.

The laws in force in each of these countries express a political compromise, which in turn is no doubt a consequence of the process that constructed a political community. In each case, the restraint is more moral and political than legal. The law crystallizes both changing consciousness and an altered balance of forces that underlies a new compromise on the terms of constituting a political society.

An alternative solution was suggested by Ronald Dworkin in the *New York Review of Books*. Dworkin offers a consistent liberal position, that of no censorship, and calls for doing away with any laws that may impinge on free speech, including blasphemy laws or laws that criminalize Holocaust denial. What is striking about the Dworkin piece is its silence about hate speech and bigotry and how to confront it. Ask yourself: what, after all, is the rationale for criminalizing Holocaust Denial? Clearly, not free speech. Rather, it is the more urgent imperative for peaceful coexistence between Christians and Jews in post-Holocaust Europe. Let us remember that the very notion of a Judeo-Christian civilization is mainly a post-Holocaust political project. Prior to the Holocaust, mainstream politics did not hyphenate Judaism with Christianity, but opposed one to the other.

The fact is that whereas the law can be a corrective on individual discrimination, it has seldom been an effective restraint on hate movements that target vulnerable minorities. If the episode of the Danish cartoons demonstrated one thing, it was that Islamophobia was a growing presence in Europe. One is struck by the ideological diversity of this phenomenon. Just as there was a left wing anti-Semitism in Europe before fascism, contemporary Islamophobia too is articulated in not only the familiar language of the right, but also the less familiar language of the left. The latter language is secular, even feminist. The Danish cartoons and their enthusiastic re-publication throughout Europe, in both right and left wing papers, was our first public glimpse of left

and right Islamophobia marching in step formation. Its political effect has been to explode the middle ground, reminiscent of the blowing up of the shrine, which triggered the civil war between Shiite and Sunni in Iraq.

My sense is that we are now entering a period where Islamophobia in Europe is maturing into an ideology of hate, a grand ideology driven by a core explanation of what is wrong with the world: hence the growing claim that there is a clash of civilizations.

I want to close by suggesting a scale of responses, with an accent on more rather than less debate, and a focus more on the political than the legal. The real challenge is intellectual and political.

The intellectual challenge lies in distinguishing between two strands in the history of free speech – blasphemy and bigotry.[6] The political challenge lies in building a local and global coalition against all forms of bigotry. If the local context is the dramatic growth of Muslim minorities in Europe and their struggle for human and citizenship rights, the global context is an equally dramatic turning point in world history. The history of the past five centuries has been one of Western domination. Beginning 1491, Western colonialism understood and presented itself to the world at large as a civilizing and a rescue mission, a mission to rescue minorities and to civilize majorities. The colonizing discourse historically focused on barbarities among the colonized – sati, child marriage and polygamy in India, female genital mutilation and slavery in Africa – and presented colonialism as a rescue mission for women, children, and minorities, at the same time claiming to be a larger project to civilize majorities. Meanwhile, Western minorities lived in the colonies with privilege and impunity. Put together, it has been five centuries of an inability to live with difference in the world. The irony is that a growing number of mainstream European politicians, perhaps nostalgic about empire, are

experimenting with importing these same time-tested rhetorical techniques into domestic politics: the idea is to compile a list of barbaric cultural practices among immigrant minorities, as a way first to isolate, then to stigmatize, and then to frame them.

However, the world is changing. New powers are on the horizon: most obviously, China and India. Neither has a Muslim majority, but both have significant Muslim minorities. The Danish case teaches us by negative example: how not to respond to a changing world with fear and anxiety, masked with arrogance, but rather to try a little humility to understand the ways in which the world is indeed changing.

There is also a lesson here for Muslim peoples. The Middle East and Islam are part of the middle ground in this contest on the horizon. Rather than be tempted to think that the struggle against Islamophobia is the main struggle – for it is not – let us put it in this larger context. For that larger context will both help us identify allies and highlight the importance of building alliances. This is not time to close ranks, but to open them, to identify issues of common concern to all who wish to live together in this rapidly shrinking world.

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[6] Even though there are important instances where the boundary is blurred, as in the case of responses to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

The confluence of religious bigotry and politics has created a very dangerous situation which is spreading intolerance in society. Indeed, the opposition protest has opened up various fault lines, impeding democratic process in the country. Imran Khan's arrogance, his authoritarian ways, and his government's failure to deliver have also been a major cause for the opposition taking to the streets. Democratic space has shrunk and the PTI's politics of vendetta presents the biggest threat to democracy. There is a need for strengthening the democratic struggle and resisting the trend of rising authoritarianism in the country. But resorting to undemocratic means and using the religion card is extremely harmful. The writer is an author and journalist. Culture affects politics. As a general rule, people expect politicians to behave VERY consistently with prevailing cultural i... Of course culture plays off politics to a large degree as well; we have a great many comedians and social commentators who make their living poking fun at or reporting on the antics of their elected officials. Still, I think culture affects politics much more than the other way around. 4. In Dancing With Bigotry, Macedo and Bartolomé use examples from the mass media, popular culture, and politics to illustrate the larger situations facing educators and how this type of argument is both ignored in much of the academic research and rhetoric. They also examine why it is essential to take on the sources of 'mass public education.' Academia needs to understand that the popular press and mass media educate more people about issues regarding ethnicity and race than all other sources of education available to U.S. citizens. By shunning the mass media, educators are missing the obvious Talk:Bigotry. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search. This is the talk page for discussing improvements to the Bigotry redirect. This is not a forum for general discussion of the article's subject. Put new text under old text. bigotry should be the root article that describes the psychological concept, bigotry, and the usage of terms related to description of intolerance and prejudice. Support (1)[edit]. Support. Bigotry is the characteristic of a prejudiced person who is intolerant of opinions, lifestyles, or identities differing from their own. A – B – C – D – E – F – G – H – I – J – K – L – M – N – O – P – Q – R – S – T – U – V – W – X – Y – Z – See also. Sorted alphabetically by author or source. [U]ntil this awful blasphemy is got rid of, there never will be any liberal science in the world. John Adams, letter to Thomas Jefferson (22 January 1825).