Guest Editorial

Special Issue: Islam, Culture, and the Charlie Hebdo Affair

Free Speech is Free for Whom?

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The attacks against the staff of Charlie Hebdo (CH), a humor magazine based in Paris, on January 7, 2015, has been rightfully condemned by the international community. Much of the initial reporting focused on the fact that the gunmen were of North African descent and were Muslim. These facts meant that they were responding to the publication by CH of cartoons deemed insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. Such an understanding seems to flow logically from the response of certain Muslims to the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1989, and of cartoons of Muhammad printed in Jyllands-Postens, a Danish newspaper, in 2005. In addition, the release of a YouTube film in 2011 called *Innocence of Muslims* is often cited as a proximate cause of an attack on a US consulate in Benghazi, Libya. This narrative sets up an easily understood conflict between Islam and free speech.

There is an analytic issue in attempting to create a conflict between a religion and a concept. Aside from the obvious lack of parallelism, neither has an agency of its own. A religion is constituted by the actions and interpretations of those who claim adherence to it; free expression must be exercised to be real.

What makes the narrative so compelling is that it indexes other symbols. If free speech is "good," then everything associated with it must be good. This includes ideas of democracy, secularism, Enlightenment, Reformation, and modernity. Two of these terms refer to historical moments, the meanings and values of which are not generally agreed upon in specifics. The other three terms are also ill-defined, and mean different things in different cultural contexts, even in the semiosphere represented by the "West."

In a state of competition, if free speech is good, then Islam must be bad. The religion indexes a series of depictions of the "Other," such as violence, lack of culture/civilization, poor gender roles, superstition/illogic, and primitiveness. This construction, a significant part of Orientalist discourse, goes back centuries. However, the ways in which the "Other" is constructed is not limited to Muslims, but is used to describe minorities of any type, whether they are minorities by religion, race, ethnicity, gender, class, or sexuality.

By questioning the very narrative engendered by the attacks on the workers of CH, we understand the ways in which post-Enlightenment liberal values are, in fact, methods for continued exclusion. That we can offer such a critique does not mean that the aspirations of these values is inherently problematic. Rather, they too have no agency, and it is in the ways in which these values are referenced and applied that is problematic. Specifically at stake is the idea that the Enlightenment is the teleological end for humanity; as a result there is only way to be modern; and the liberal values generated by the Enlightenment are neutral and should be universally accepted.

The premises result in an inevitable conflict between the nation-state and alternate sources of authority, such as those found in religious communities. The state is most interested in control and order, and there are many examples of the way liberalism is deployed to control populations. Once we destabilize the idea the Enlightenment is a natural goal for all people, and establish that it is something that is deeply contextual, we can question the results of the project.

If we take the period of Enlightenment as beginning in the mid- to late-17th century, and continuing for roughly a hundred years, we see a philosophical push towards individual liberties, and a break with structures of religious authority. The basis of religious tolerance, freedom from tyranny, and rationalism as normative structures come from this period. Yet, these ideas, which lacked a general consensus amongst contemporary thinkers, are deeply conditioned by the historical realities within Europe at the time.

Emerging out of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, religion and religious authority was understood within the framework of Christianity. Despite the presence of religious minorities, most notably a large Jewish population throughout many European countries, the boundaries of discourse were always shaped by a particular notion of what constituted true religion.

It is in the language of religious tolerance, as a case study, that we can see the ways in which liberal values are not applied universally, or even conceived of as such. It was heavily conditioned by the religious wars of the time, and was perhaps more ecumenical in conception than interfaith.

For example, pre-modern anti-Semitism was defined in strongly Christian terms, with charges of Deicide leveled against Jews. Despite this allegation, and the deployment of myths like the blood libel, the various pogroms never lead to full genocide of European Jews because they fulfilled a theological purpose. The Second Coming of Jesus is dependent on a community of Jews heralding his return.

The rationalism and break with religious authority of the Enlightenment broke away from this theological anti-Semitism. Yet, in constructing the idea of the citizen, anti-Semitism was enshrined in a different way, a way that was tied intimately to the construction of the nation. The Jew became the The Stranger, the foreigner who comes to stay, but does not truly belong. While most noticeable in the German context, each country engaged in what becomes known in the Enlightenment incorporates anti-Semitism into national identity to varying degrees.

There are, of course, other categories of exclusion, based on race and gender, which expose the myth of the values of the Enlightenment as being conceived of as being universally applicable to all humans. Rather, it was, in many instances, an emancipatory movement for a certain elite class, to break from strictures of religious authority that were uncomfortable. Using the language of rationalism, contra belief, the project reinscribed various hierarchies under a new structural authority, that of the nation-state. To imagine new ways of ordering the world was not the primary goal. The iterative results of the Enlightenment have undeniably resulted in new ways of ordering the world, as the theoretical implications of many of the thinkers of the time have been expanded in practice. At the same time, it is not a proof that the values espoused in the earliest period were conceived of as universal, or that they are the only response to the modern. It is a variety of different responses to the modern that become labeled as a unified whole. It coincides with the rise of empire and colonialism, so that the language of the Enlightenment is forced upon the colonies. In the use of rationalism and civilization, justification is found for violence against the Other, wherever he is found. The idea that Enlightenment ideas are superior and therefore accepted universally ignores the fact that they were spread by force, imposed on populations that had different responses to the modern. The context of each community determines their own responses, many of which were effaced by colonialism, or simply rejected.

The different material and religious contexts of Muslim societies means that they had different responses to questions of modernity. That the Wahhabi cult has a particularly nihilistic and reprehensible response to modernity is undeniable. Yet, they were armed and supported by the British Empire, overrunning stronger, more organic ideas of modernity in the region. The Mossadegh Era of Iran was a stable, democratic response to questions of modernity that was destabilized by American and British interference. There are numerous other examples of nations that are the result of Enlightenment thinking, not putting into practice that thinking, while using the Enlightenment as a justification for not putting it into practice: the *mission civilisatrice*.

The liberal values that emerge as a result of the Enlightenment are also tainted by ties to the idea that there is only way to be civilized. These values become tools to reify hierarchy and belonging. Masked in language of rationalism and scientism, we see ways in which liberalism is used to control populations. In the

United States, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X serve as examples of responses to the issues Enlightenment racism. For King, the response was to a call to the spiritual authority of Christianity, a counter-force to the cultural, legal, and scientific racism of the period. While X also turned to religion, he critiqued both Christianity and the Enlightenment as being part of the same enterprise, and turned to Islam as a third way.

Both experienced double-consciousness, and returned the gaze, coopting the symbols of "civilization" as their own. This performance of culture challenged common notions of the "internal savage." Resulting economic, education, and penal policies sought to continue marginalizing Black communities, while continuing to engage in the discourse of liberalism, embedding racial disparities into the national framework. Since religion was such an important part of the rhetoric of King and X, providing an alternative source of authority, religion had to be policed as well.

There are certain ways in which religion can be "good." Using the "culture talk" of racism, certain religions and practices are inherently "bad." Of course, these definitions are not absolute, but are what is of greatest service to the state. Such thinking is informed by the problematics of defining "religion," as a whole. Using forms of Protestant Christianity as a norm, other religions were defined against it. Since the broad idea of the Study of Religion coincided with the Enlightenment, there was a sense that the forms of Christianity that served as archetypes of religion, were in fact also the forms of religion that other traditions should be measured against (and always found lacking).

The idea of defining "good" and "bad" religion was not limited to the United States. It is common in many of the nations involved in the Enlightenment project, including France. Despite the language of *laïcité*, the French approach to religion not only privileges certain religions, but excludes others, including Islam. This context is an important part of understanding the attacks on CH.

Perhaps the most well-known examples of the French state defining acceptable practices of Muslims involves women's dress. Through a variety of laws, women are prevented from wearing *hijab*, a head covering, or *niqab*, a face covering, in public spaces. Although supposedly neutral in intent, it clearly impacts Mus-

lim women. When Muslim groups speak out against the ban, claiming it directly targets them, the general response is that the Muslims are claiming a communal identity over a French identity, and cannot therefore be French. This rhetoric is a variation of the civilizing mission, legislating a particular performance of Frenchness. If these standards are not met, then one cannot be French.

Of course, while constructed under the guise of secularism, the denial of one group's religious dress code implicitly privileges another religious group's understanding of appropriate attire. The original law, passed in 2004, banned "ostentatious" or "conspicuous" religious symbols, allowing for crosses and Stars of David to be worn as pendants, a more explicit form of religious privileging. The Crémieux Decree (1870) also granted citizenship to Algerians of Jewish descent, but not Muslim descent. This preference was based on resistance to French colonization of Algeria. Coupled with the Dreyfuss Affair (1894) shortly after, displaying deep French anti-Semitism, demonstrated that religious tolerance was a political tool, not a philosophical belief.

For the Muslim communities of France, which were policed long before the Global War on Terror (GWOT), these formal structures of exclusion are compounded by casual practices of racism. These practices include discrimination in hiring, differential access to education, and a Minister of the Interior, who would go on to become Prime Minister, calling them "scum." These are communities that see themselves excluded from the state by the very philosophical tradition that should give them access to it.

Under the guise of secularism, legal mechanisms for addressing religious discrimination are not available, and blasphemy laws are enforced for Christian and Jewish communities, but not Muslim ones. When an anti-Islamophobia group in France sought to put up an ad including visibly Muslim figures and the words "nous aussi sommes la nation," ("we too are the nation"), they were forbidden to do so because it made "political demands." In this context, the CH cartoons are not satire, understood to be attacking power, but bullying the disenfranchised. If the response to speech is more speech, every opportunity for engaging with the CH cartoons as citizens was cut off for Muslim communities.

Nor can the GWOT be removed from this discussion. The idea of culture talk allows Muslims to be constructed as violent a priori. Politics, war, economics, and other material concerns play no role in the decision of Muslims to be violent in this rhetoric. They operate in an ahistoric space. This construction, of course, absolves the Enlightened state to avoid questions of its constructs policies that create systematic inequality, war, and second-class citizenship. The Kaouchi brothers had been arrested for supporting terrorism. They had served time in prison. Yet, they were not under surveillance, and their attack was unanticipated. One counter-terrorism expert believes that this may be because of the broad-based surveillance of the entire Muslim community reduced the resources available to go after more specific threats.

That most people, including Muslims, reacted to *The Satanic Verses* with peaceful protests, especially in places with large civil societies and civic engagement, is overlooked. During the Danish cartoon "crisis," it was Danish Muslims who engaged with the state at the time of publication; it was months later in autocratic states that Danish embassies were threatened. The attack on the consulate in Benghazi is widely believed to have been planned to coincide with the 10th anniversary of 9/11, not a spontaneous response to a film; and, the number of Libyans who came to the aid of Americans at the consulate is forgotten. The narrative of the Muslim barbarian is well established, both through rhetoric and policy.

In the story of the attack on the staff of CH, we see the pattern again. Enlightenment ideals are under attack by the uncivilized horde. Yet, the free speech discussion conflates the right to say whatever one chooses with the license to do so. Any discussion of rights involves a discussion of citizenship. No individual rights is constructed as absolute in a community. The French motto of *liberté*, *egalité*, *fraternité* recognizes this relationship between the individual and the state. Such a negotiation is not only accepted, but expected. However, for Muslim citizens of France, to engage in this negotiation is to betray the state. Only one of the statements of the motto are under discussion now: *liberté*. The other two are left by the wayside, because they would create uneasy questions about how universal liberal values truly are.

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