

HOW TO CRITICIZE ISLAM? "INNOCENCE OF MUSLIMS" AND THE WAR OF REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MIRROR OF THE CLASH BETWEEN RADICAL ISLAM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA¹

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Introduction

Of all the great religions of the world today, no one makes as often the headlines as Islam, whether in the guise of criticism of its allegedly inherent abuses or in reaction to such criticism accused of "Islamophobia". What explains the "Islamic anger" that periodically explodes around the world in reaction to real or imagined insults related to

¹ Article based on a lecture given at the *First International Symposium of the Southeast Brazilian Association of History of Religions* (ABHR), Sudeste da ABHR Associação Brasileira de História das Religiões (ABHR), 1o Simpósio Internacional da ABHR, "Diversidade e (In)Tolerâncias Religiosas" ("Diversity and (In) Religious Tolerance"), São Paulo, October 31, 2013, subsequently published as in Eduardo Meinberg de Albuquerque Maranhão Filho (Org.), *Religiões e religiosidades em (Con)textos 2*. Fonte Editorial, 2015. We use here the term Islamophobia despite its unfortunate connotations. Earlier proposals for a more neutral nomenclature of the phenomenon of prejudice, hatred and/or discrimination and/or harassment of Muslims and/or their religion the Islam, by non-Muslims included "anti-Muslimism" in parallel with anti-Semitism (cf. Halliday (1999), p. 160-194); "anti-Muslim racism" and "Muslimophobia" (cf. Göndör (2013)): "anti-Islamism" and "Islamoprejudice" (cf. Imhoff & Recker (2012)). These terms have not found wide acceptance. The word *Islamophobia*, literally "fear of Islam", is an invention of the British antiracist think tank the Runnymede Trust. Islamist intellectuals subsequently adopted it to delegitimize criticism, ridicule and blasphemy of Islam (cf. Conway (1997)). Next the term was adopted by official Islamic associations such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in the latter's ongoing campaign to prohibit such criticism, in parallel to bans already in force against racism and anti-Semitism (*i.a.* at the UN). There is no consensus as to whether Islamophobia should be understood as a form of racism. Then the term also came to include discrimination of Muslims regardless of their faith: the concept thus amalgamates an opaque mix of illegitimate phenomena. However, it has gained acceptance, and we use it in a neutral and purely descriptive manner. (Incidentally the term anti-Semitism, nowadays universally used, stems from no less controversial roots, and has no fewer disadvantages; also here alternatives such as "Judeophobia" (Rodinson) never caught on). Cf. Malik (2009), Bruckner (2011), and Fourest & Venner (2003), in particular pp. 230-280 ("Une nouvelle stratégie: censurer au nom de l'antiracisme").

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either the content or the taboos of that religion? It is justified? How should the non-Islamic world deal with it? Should it at all be allowed to criticize Islam? Where are the alternative Muslim voices, more open to dialogue? These are the questions that guide this article.

Our starting point is the grossly Islamophobic video "Innocence of Muslims" (*IoM*) aired on YouTube in July 2012, of "Sam Bacile", or Nakouka Basseley Nakoula, an Egyptian Copt living in California. The trailer shows passive Egyptian security forces as Muslims set fire and loot homes of Egyptian Christians. After that the short movie passes to parodied "historical" scenes that depict the Prophet of Islam as a clown, a seducer, homosexual, pedophile, and a bloodthirsty and sadistic thief.³

These insults to the Prophet Muhammad triggered in September of the same year a wave of protests and riots across the Muslim world, resulting in at least 29 deaths. It is also known that anti-American attacks of the jihadist outfit Ansar al-Shari'a in Benghazi, Libya that cost US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens his life, were partly motivated by the movie. Outraged Muslims demanded its immediate withdrawal and an apology from the United States. The US government disavowed the movie but claimed not to pull it off the net due to US law protecting freedom of expression. YouTube argued that the film criticized Islam's religious ideas, which is legitimate, but did not insult Muslims as a group - in the latter case it might have been understood as racism and/or be banned.⁴

The issue allows us at once to distinguish two recurring aspects in the discussion:

1) the relationship (contradiction or overlap) between free speech and hate speech. What makes up insult or blasphemy (offense to God) and what characterizes its opposite, respect? And what should prevail, respect and absence of insult or absolute freedom of expression, even to the point of including freedom to insult?

2) the responsibility of the author for his/her words and works, and the relationship between criticism (or joke, which is a benign form of insult) which may include an element of verbal or symbolic violence - and physical violence? Do hate speech and criticism lead to or facilitate violence? What is the responsibility of the one who expresses a thought for the consequences flowing from that thought?

³ Kirkpatrick (2012).

⁴ Cain-Miller (2012). Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innocence_of_muslims#cite_ref-nytimes-youtuberethink_70-1.

1. Free speech *versus* hate speech

Background: precedents

IoM is one of the latest scandals, but it is not an isolated case of censorship for religious reasons. Within the Christian world, publications, artwork, opinions expressed in public speeches or in the classroom which hurt Christian sensibilities, caused from partial and *a posteriori* censorship to torture and execution of "blasphemers", "heretics" or "heathens". Such incidents have marked the West's entire intellectual history. The struggle to conquer a legitimate space for intellectual and/or scientific challenge is hardly less ancient, and constituted a chief element of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The resulting freedom of expression has become a cornerstone of modernity and the memory of these struggles, an integral part of our canonical narrative of emancipation.

Other civilizations also faced with tensions between the spheres of the sacred and inviolable, and those of free thought, artistic expression, and the desire of knowledge. Thus in imperial China limitations imposed by Confucian orthodoxy on scientific research may in the long run have been fatal to creativity and even a factor in Chinese resistance to Western influences.⁵ In a more recent past, thought controls in the Communist Soviet Union are now considered to have been obstacles that hampered its computer revolution and caused it to stay behind the US. The Islamic world too has had its share of impediments to free expression. Some well-known infamous episodes include the destruction of the library of Alexandria in 642 AD; establishment of an inquisition of *ahl al-hadith* (Hanbalis) by mu'tazilites in the Abbasid caliphate (followed by a reverse persecution); and prohibiting printing in Arabic letters (though not in Hebrew) in the Ottoman Empire in 1515.⁶ However, such intolerance was the exception rather than the rule. During the Golden Age there was a greater freedom of expression in Islam than in medieval Christendom, allowing for a flourishing not only of arts and

⁵ Elvin (1973) p. 225-234.

⁶ The traditional story of the destruction of the Alexandria library by Amr ibn al-'As on orders of Caliph 'Umar is contested by several sources, cf. Lewis (1990) and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destruction_of_the_Library_of_Alexandria. Cf. Hodgson (1974) p. 384-392; 437-442. The ban on printing in the Ottoman Empire was softened at the end of the 16th century, yet a press in Turkish and Arabic letters only took off in the 19th century: Lewis (1968) p. 50-51. Cf. also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Printing>.

literature but also of medicine, natural, human and social sciences.⁷ Even the freedom to criticize religion has not always been as limited as it is now. The image of the Prophet himself could be represented without major problems.⁸ In the 20th century criticism of religion has remained a source of problems in several countries where religious authorities command influence of, such as the Catholic Church in the Philippines or in Argentina before Perón, or the Buddhist hierarchy in Tibet before 1958 to the openly atheistic and antireligious communist regimes of the USSR and China. But in no religion has the issue of freedom to criticize become so central as in Islam.

The exacerbation of conflict over freedom of expression in Islam is, however, relatively recent. The novel *The Satanic Verses* (1989) of Anglo-Indian author Salman Rushdie was arguably the first case of a book indirectly critical of religion to cause a response of a never seen magnitude around the Muslim world, culminating in the *fatwa* in which Ayatollah Khomeini sentenced the author to death for blasphemy.

In more than one way the Rushdie affair became the prototype of a whole sequence of scandals. In 1994 the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin faced persecution because of her anti-fundamentalist novel *Lajja* ("Shame"). The following year the rationalistic and atheistic Pakistani journalist Ibn Warraq published his criticism of Islam *Why I am not a Muslim* (1995).⁹ Since then he regularly needs police protection to speak in public. In 2003 the Dutch-Somali politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali produced together with journalist Theo van Gogh the film *Submission*, a documentary that projected verses from the Koran on the naked bodies of women, as a kind of criticism of the position of women in Islam. Van Gogh was killed by a radical Islamist, and the life of Hirsi Ali, threatened. In 2005, publication by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad led to an international scandal. The crisis has affected the relationship of Denmark with Muslim countries, which called for a ban of the publication. Cartoonist Kurt Westergaard was threatened and in demonstrations that

⁷ Extensive scientific and cultural advance took also place in the natural sciences, *i.a.* in algebra, astronomy, and optics; in humanities (e.g. grammar); and in social science, *e.g.* by Ibn Khaldun, the well-known 14th century precursor of sociology).

⁸ The recent taboo against any figurative representation of the Prophet reached an almost absurd climax when radical Muslims demanded in 2008 that Wikipedia remove a 17th century illustration showing Muhammad from its article that itself explains the evolution of the taboo: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Depictions_of_Muhammad.

⁹ Ibn Warraq is a pseudonym, the author's real name remains unknown. He leads a group of "secular Muslims" at the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society (ISIS): <http://www.centerforinquiry.net/isis/>.

followed around the Islamic world, ca. 40 people lost their lives.¹⁰ The best known of these cartoons represented Islam's prophet with a bomb hidden in his turban, to symbolize the supposed link between Islam and terrorism. Ironically, the cartoons were part of a campaign to criticize what the newspaper saw as excessive self-censorship in Western media regarding problematic phenomena within Islam.

In 2006 a new storm arose because of a speech given by the pope at Regensburg University. Benedict XVI quoted an opinion of Islam given by Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologos (14th-15th century) accusing the "religion of peace" of violent tendencies. Violent protests against that claim once again resulted in several deaths. In 2008 *Fitna*, an openly anti-Islamic video of Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders led to attempts to ban the video. In 2009 Wilders was blocked from visiting the UK although he was later admitted.¹¹ In 2010, extremist Protestant pastor Terry Jones of Florida announced that he would publicly burn Korans. He dropped his plan under political pressure, but the news provoked deadly riots in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Jones burned the Holy Book anyway a year later, and this became the trigger for renewed protests). In 2011 and 2012, French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, with no specifically anti-Islamic prehistory but very committed to freedom of expression, published cartoons of Muhammad (among other religious figures).¹² In January 2015 eight of its journalists and four others were murdered by the Kouachis, two al-Qaeda in Yemen-related brothers. Five more were killed during the terrorists' pursuit which ended in their death. Two days later their friend Amedy Coulibaly went on a rampage and killed four patrons of a Jewish supermarket in Paris.

This short list of incidents is far from exhaustive. Most cases occur in the Muslim world itself and these rarely hit the headlines of Western media. Anyway, when Nakoula put his movie on YouTube, he joined an already long history of anti-Western Islamic friction regarding freedom of expression. Some cases involve explicitly and deliberately offensive representations, but these are a minority. Among the issues deemed offensive and showing "lack of respect" one finds a whole range of artistic, or just opinionating,

¹⁰ In addition to ca. 150 dead in anti-Christian pogroms triggered by protests against the cartoons in Nigeria: Tattersall (2010).

¹¹ Australia also tried to deny Wilders a visa. He was tried in the Netherlands for violating its anti-hate speech laws but acquitted in 2011: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geert_Wilders#In_the_United_Kingdom

¹² *Fitna* translates as temptation or anarchy, which may refer either to 7th century CE intra-Islamic civil wars or to female attraction. Dove World Outreach Center Pastor Jones has also been involved in disseminating the *IoM* video: Fisher (2012).

and even scientific expressions. It is therefore essential to differentiate the critique of Islam from ridiculing that religion. And it is no less important to differentiate between criticizing the Islamic religion per se and sowing seeds of hatred and contempt of Muslims.

We may thus identify three categories of "offenses": artistic production, scientific research, and Islamophobic propaganda proper. From a liberal and secular point of view (*i.e.* one not committed a priori to the truth of any specific worldview), only the third group fits the category of objectionable of hate speech. It is important to distinguish between these categories, for they show that there is a whole range of expressions that, even if loathsome to many or most Muslims, are still legitimate and deserving of protection.

(1) Artistic production

In the first, artistic and philosophical, category, one finds novels, including satirical ones, paintings, movies, music,¹³ films, essays, as well as jokes and cartoons. Also political opinions or philosophical essays may include criticism of religion in general (e.g. Hobbes or Schopenhauer) or of any faith in particular, for instance of Islam. There exists in the West a long line of anti-Christian or in general antireligious thinkers and authors. Voltaire and Hume are just two of them. In recent days, biologist Richard Dawkins and journalist Christopher Hitchens follow the same critical tradition.¹⁴ However, works critical of Christianity also risk irritating Muslim sensibilities, since figures such as the Virgin Mary (Maryam) or Jesus (the Prophet 'Issa) are also respected in Islam. Thus the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese (1989, based on the novel of Nikos Kazantzakis) stoked Muslim anger with its representation of the Christ as a fallible human being who could fall in love with a woman. Israel banned the movie to avoid problems with the Muslim minority. Greece, Turkey, Mexico, Chile,

¹³ For fear of Muslim reactions the Deutsche Oper Berlin withdrew from its 2006 programming Hans Neuenfels' production of Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*, which included the severed heads of Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed as a symbol of emancipation of religion: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_Idomeneo_controversy.

¹⁴ Dawkins (2006). The book was prosecuted as blasphemous in Turkey, but the case was dismissed: *cf.* <http://web.archive.org/web/2007112922236/http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/europe/11/28/dawkins.turkey.ap/index.html>. Richard Dawkins discussed his atheistic views with journalist Mehdi Hassan on the show "Head to Head" of *al-Jazeera*: Dawkins (2013).

Argentina, the Philippines, and Singapore also banned the film.

(2) Scientific research

A second category includes works of serious research that directly or indirectly criticize aspects of Islam. "Orientalist" studies developed historically from anti-Islamic Christian polemics, which since the Middle Ages had depicted the Prophet of Islam as fraudulent, the Koran as a case of plagiarism or a "second hand Bible", and in general adopted extremely hostile (as well as quite ignorant) postures *vis-à-vis* Islam. All the same, whatever its origins (and regardless of criticisms of supposed political use of the work of these "Orientalists"), the study has become since the 19th century a reputable and legitimate science, similar in its methodology to sinology or African or Latin American studies.¹⁵ Orientalist scholars analyzing Islamic sources sometimes come to conclusions incompatible with the fundamentals of religion, just as previously critical Bible scholars provoked the wrath of the church when they showed that the Pentateuch could not have been written entirely by Moses, or when they pointed at discrepancies among the four Gospels regarding the life of Jesus Christ.

Serious Islam scholars concentrate nowadays on two dimensions: (a) the origins of the sacred sources, and (b) contradictions between Islamic morality and Western human rights. Both issues, incidentally, exercise also the best progressive Muslim creative minds - and hurt the sensibilities of the most conservative.

(a) Among the most controversial subjects in the first group is that of the **authenticity of the Qur'an** and its internal contradictions. The following few examples illustrate how scholarly opinion may touch a raw nerve with Muslim readers. Western researchers have since the 19th century reconstructed the presence of external, *e.g.* Jewish, influences on the content and text of Islam's sacred sources. Joseph Schacht showed in 1950 that the vast majority of the *ahadith* - even those tradition accepts as authentic - do not date back to Muhammad. Based on the oldest manuscripts of the Qur'an (found in Yemen), Gerd Puin concludes that the text had not yet been fully

¹⁵ The most important critiques of the Orientalist tradition are in Abdel Malek (1963) (pp. 103-140) and Said (1978). Irwin (2006) analyzes the growth of Oriental Studies as a science (and strongly criticizes Said).

consolidated in 671.¹⁶ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in their book *Hagarism* (1977) tried to prove - basing their argument on the absence of contemporary secondary sources - that our current Qur'an could not have been compiled before ca. 700 AD, i.e. 70 years after the Prophet's death. That would give short shrift to the dogma that the text was received as such by the Messenger and is literally God's word.¹⁷ There are even those who doubt the historicity of Muhammad, deconstructing him as a mythological figure.¹⁸ Many of these scholars are not guided by any *a priori* anti-Islamic animus but by the search for historical truth. However, some of their findings are inconsistent with Islamic faith as understood by most faithful - and deeply uncomfortable for many of them. Reactions may be extreme. Several researchers have been threatened, and publish under pseudonym. Another emblematic case was that of the late Egyptian Islamologist Nasr Abu-Zayd, whose application of the philological method to the Qur'an led Muslim fundamentalists to sue the author for apostasy. Under Egyptian law, derived from the shari'a, and unlike Western positive natural law, blasphemy, adultery and various other "crimes" do not fall under the civil law where the injured party must prove the damage to his person, but under the rubric of "war against God", so anyone can, in the name of the of the *hisba* principle ("ordering the good and forbidding evil") lodge a complaint against the accused. Once it was determined that the defendant had betrayed Islam in his publications, and was therefore no longer a Muslim, he was sentenced in 1993 to divorce his wife: marriage of a Muslim with a non-Muslim is forbidden. The couple took refuge in Holland, where Abu Zayd was hosted by Leiden University. The case is extreme, but not unique. It is useful to remember that within Islamic milieus, the latitude to criticize used to be much wider in the past than it is today. And openness to take criticism is often an indicator of force rather than of weakness.¹⁹

(b) Also the question "**human rights and Islam**" is broad, and the bibliography

¹⁶ In July 2015 a manuscript was identified as being the oldest Qur'an text extant, possibly dating back to the Prophet's lifetime: 'Oldest' Koran fragments found in Birmingham University. BBC 22-7-2015: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-33436021>. For some critical reactions, cf. The Guardian 22-7-2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/22/oldest-quran-fragments-found-at-birmingham-university>, and JihadWarch 22-7-2015 <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2015/07/oldest-quran-fragments-in-the-world-discovered-in-the-uk-maybe-maybe-not>.

¹⁷ Joseph Schacht (1950), Ohlig & Puin (2009). Reception of Crone and Cook's book was not positive, and Liaquat Ali Khan (2006) claims they have recently mitigated his thesis, but this remains uncertain. Cf. Crone (2008).

¹⁸ Christoph Luxenberg (2011) is also a pseudonym. Cf. Magister (2004). John Wansbrough (1977 and 1978) has attempted deconstruction of the canonical version of the origins of Islam (Irwin 2006 *op. cit.*, pp. 268-273). Wansbrough and Spencer have questioned the historical existence of Muhammad.

¹⁹ About Nasr Abu Zayd cf. Eltahawy (1999).

shows a range of well-known dilemmas: freedom of religion (or of missionizing, or of leaving Islam, or even of not accepting any religion) is severely circumscribed in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, for both non-Muslims and Muslims who differ from the orthodoxy in power; physical punishments such as flogging of 'disobedient' women, stoning of adulterers, amputation of hand of thieves such as take place in Iran; crucifixion of apostates in Yemen and elsewhere by al-Qaeda militia, or repression of homosexuality (and of many other expressions of sexuality outside marriage) in many African states, in Iran, Pakistan and elsewhere; anti-Semitism, ubiquitous in Gaza under Hamas; discrimination against Christians and Hindus, common in Pakistan and Afghanistan under the Taliban and growing in Egypt, Iraq, and areas of Syria "liberated" by al-Qaeda and related groups; slavery unacceptable to non-Muslims, but officially practiced in Saudi Arabia until 1960 and until 2007 in Mauritania - but unofficially still frequent there and elsewhere; and violent jihad as a religious duty, which serves as justification for terrorism for a plethora of extreme Islamist groups (which obviously does not cancel the value of jihad as spiritual struggle).

(3) Islamophobic propaganda

Artistic, philosophical and/or scientific expressions incompatible with, or critical of Islam must be distinguished from actual anti-Islamic propaganda (although they might theoretically go together) which includes expressions custom tailored to cause pain and anger among the victims, and to provoke discrimination, hatred and even violent action among their victimizers. *IoM* undoubtedly belongs to this third category: *hate speech*.

Again Muslims are not the only ones to have suffered persecution. The parallels with many other minority groups or discriminated outsiders is undeniable: Blacks, Freemasons, women, homosexuals and the hated minority par excellence - the Jews. There are clear parallels between the anti-Semitic discourse that has permeated European history, from the Church Fathers to Wagner, and today's Islamophobic arguments of former Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in France or the late Jörg

Haider of the Austrian Freedom Party.²⁰ From this point of view Europe's Muslims are not fundamentally different from earlier minorities. On the other hand, it is equally undeniable that a correct citizenship education can reduce bias. Sometimes progress is so fast that the previous, deplorable, situation is soon forgotten. 50 years ago jokes about "crazies", disabled and Blacks were common and acceptable. One of Hergé's first albums, *Tintin in Congo* (1931), represented the Congolese as caricatures of Blacks with full lips and speaking a pitiful dialect. Yet no one thought to ban Tintin.²¹ The public and legal acceptance of homosexuality in the West is amounts to a social revolution – just one generation homosexual acts were still punishable in England, in several US States, and in Latin America.²² Following these precedents, it is conceivable that the integration of Muslims, these days such a hot issue on the political agenda of most European states, might happen sooner than expected, once the right public policies were implemented. The question is whether tabooizing or even prohibiting criticism of Islam should be part of these policies. That is in fact the demand of the OIC. Islam is unique among all the great religions in its militancy on this point. This leads to the question of whence this hypersensitivity.

Islam - more sensitive?

More than other religions, Islam dictates the believers' lifestyle and integrates them in an entire social and civilizational system. As a result, despite many variations, all Muslim societies share certain basic features.²³ Islam inculcates in the faithful a sense of belonging to a shared supranational community. Studies document that, at least in the Middle East, people today tend to identify themselves as Muslim rather than as Arab or

²⁰ Jean-Marie Le Pen (1972-2011) and his daughter Marine Le Pen (2011-) lead the French Right-wing anti-immigrant Front National (National Front; Jörg Haider was active in the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) from 1974 to his death in 2008.

²¹ Author Hergé (Georges Rémi) redrew the offending images in 1954. In 2007 a Congolese student tried to ban the book by racism: cf. Samuel (2011) and Hogg (2012).

²² Brazil was one of the first countries to decriminalize homosexual activity, as early as 1830. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_status_of_homosexuality_in_Brazil;
http://www.athosgls.com.br/comportamento_visualiza.php?contcod=15188

²³ Czech-British anthropologist Ernst Gellner observed, "For all the indisputable diversity, the remarkable thing is the extent to which Muslim societies resemble each other. (...) At least in the bulk of Muslim societies, in the main Islamic block between Central Asia and the Atlantic shores of Africa, one has the feeling that the same and limited pack of cards has been dealt. The hands vary, but the pack is the same." Gellner (1981), p. 99.

Egyptian, Syrian, etc. Moreover, Islam seems to evince greater sensitivity to expressions that might be construed as criticism. The junction of "over-identification" and "over-sensitivity" expresses itself in a sequence of cries of pain and anger and in scandals that are often accompanied by violent anti-Western protests. How do people in the West respond? Reactions run the gamut from defensive counter-accusations to preventive self-censorship. The latter range from criticism of authors or artists targeted by insulted Muslims (equivalent to blaming the victim) to attempts to silence them. Some examples will illustrate the tendency. At the time of the *fatwa* against Rushdie, fellow author John Le Carré was one of several commentators who accused the author of the *Satanic Verses* of having provoked himself the reactions that now threatened his safety. During and after the scandal of the Danish Muhammad cartoons, CNN among other media refused to publish the polemical drawings so as not to irritate Muslim readers. Even more striking is a scientific study of the case whose editor, a university press, refused to illustrate the book with reproductions of the cartoons. The causes of this Western "politically correct" current (associated with the Left) to "protect" Islam are complex and fall outside the scope of this article.²⁴

The issue of Muslim hypersensitivity borders naturally on that of Islam's supposedly violent inclination, so different from the understanding many Muslims themselves have that theirs is the religion of peace. In fact it would not be difficult to draft a long list of violent acts committed in the name of Islam (which is not identical with violence committed by Muslims), both in the past and today. Only in recent years we have seen massacres of Christians in Nigeria, Egypt, and Iraq, stoning of adulterous women in Somalia and Afghanistan, calls for the destruction of Israel by Iran and by al-Qaeda, atrocities against Shiites in Iraq and Pakistan, murders of journalists and employees of aid organizations in Syria and Yemen, and so many other cases, and this lists just a small portion of the incidents.²⁵ However, it is easy to put together similar lists for about any religion. The real question is whether Islam has *more* violent proclivity than other religions. And the answer to that question is far from evident. For every Muslim violence one can mention equivalent or worse violence committed in the

²⁴ Spy novel author John Le Carré has recently recanted his attack on Rushdie: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9671959/Le-Carre-regrets-Rushdie-fatwa-feud.html>. Cf. Klausen 2009; Bone 2009.

²⁵ On the putative Islam/terrorism link, a cursory glance at the list of victims of terrorist acts since the 1970s shows the massive preponderance of violence by Islamist groups: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_battles_and_other_violent_events_by_death_toll#Terrorist_attacks

name, or by followers, of other religions. Just remember the terrible history of anti-Semitism in Christian Europe, the Catholic Inquisition, and more recently the pogroms of anti-Islamic Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Besides, Muslims have been the victims of specifically anti-Muslim violence. Limiting ourselves to the current epoch, there has not only been European brutality against Muslim immigrants but also lethal Hindu violence against Muslims in India, or Buddhist anti-Muslim hostility in Burma. The list lends itself to expansion, and the debate would fall in a pingpong on what is worse, Islamist or Islamophobic violence - a tacky dispute between Anders Breivik and Osama bin Laden. There are organizations and websites entirely dedicated to documenting the "crimes" of the other side.²⁶ The fact is, each religion possesses undeniably both a violent and a peaceful potential: which of these two trends turns significant or predominant at any given time or place is related to factors not necessarily linked to its theological content.²⁷

Minorities provoke protests

They say that the difference between a practicing Muslim and an Islamist is that the practicing believer makes fasts on Ramadan while the Islamist wants to force everyone to obey the commandment of fasting. Many Muslim protests against instances of insult or blasphemy are the work of small activist minorities whose Islamist militancy ends up dragging along larger and more mainstream groups. Indeed, it is probably correct to say that in most "blasphemous outbreaks" both offenders and offended are initially small intolerant minorities.

The case of *IoM* is typical. Unlike some other incidents mentioned above, there can be no doubt that the amateurish and vulgar video was made with the express purpose of offending, representing the Prophet of Islam as murderer, pedophile, and more. However, the *corpus delicti* was already for months on the Internet before being "discovered" by an Egyptian Salafi preacher, who in turn warned his followers: they are

²⁶ Much more physical violence by Muslims is reported in *e.g.* jihadwatch.org than anti-Muslim violence in *e.g.* islamophobia-watch.com. However, the latter site limits its scope to Europe and the US, where levels of violence are as such more verbal than physical (an example would be the campaign of anti-Islam propaganda promoted by Pamela Geller in the New York subway: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/15/pamela-geller-dc_n_2696907.html).

²⁷ Nor would it be correct to accuse religion in general, as demonstrated by last century's genocides committed by non-religious or even atheist regimes like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

the ones who spread the theme of "attack on religion" and this triggered strings of protests around the Muslim world. Violent incidents caused the loss of around 50 lives, even though the protests were wide rather than deep. The dramatic images projected on television screens all over the world showed the destabilizing *potential* of the movement rather than its reality. In Pakistan for instance the largest protests mobilized angry groups of not more than 5000 people clamoring for revenge. Elsewhere, the numbers were even lower. Then, after a brief period of acute crisis, other international incidents drew away public attention. It was not known at the time that the attack of Libyan jihadists on the US consulate in Benghazi and the ambassador's murder, were also linked to *IoM*. The video soon fell into oblivion.²⁸

Similar domino effects had been responsible for the Rushdie crisis in the late 1980s and for that of the Muhammad cartoons in 2005. Rushdie's novel ridiculed Islam in an indirect way - so indirect in fact it must have gone unnoticed by many readers. One chapter describes a place reminiscent of Arabia and a brothel where all the prostitutes bear names of the Prophet's wives. The writing is rather hermetic, further reducing dissemination. Still its message was recognized by Islamist activists in the UK, who judged it intolerable and organized demonstrations and public burnings of the book and of the author in effigy. In turn the waves raised in Britain echoed in other countries, at the cost of dozens of lives. Eventually they led Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution, to proclaim a *fatwa* sentencing the author to death for blasphemy. The *fatwa* then became irrevocable due to the Ayatollah's death of in 1989, condemning Rushdie to lead a reclusive life - and provoking an enduring crisis between Iran and the West (incidentally the radical posture of Iran, at the time the only Muslim state with a fundamentalist regime, helped nurture in the West the wrong but at the time popular impression that Shiites are inherently more radical and intolerant than Sunnis).

In the case of the scandal surrounding the Prophet's cartoons in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*, the crisis took even longer to blow up. Months passed after publication of the cartoons before a small group of offended Danish Muslims produced a dossier they brought to Egypt and Saudi Arabia with the express purpose of "arousing" anger. The turning point came when the self-proclaimed representatives of Danish Islam managed an interview with the *al-Jazeera* network and convinced the Arab League of the

²⁸ Cf. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/antiUSprotests/>. Cf. also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactions_to_Innocence_of_Muslims, and Kirkpatrick (2013).

seriousness of the case. Only then did the ball start rolling. In December 2005 the Congress of the Islamic Organization, put the issue on the agenda of their summit in Mecca, and produced the requisite condemnations and demands addressed *i.a.* at the UN. Thus a manufactured chain of events put the Muslim world on fire. Demonstrations, attacks on Scandinavian citizens and boycotts of Danish products followed. The official balance of this crisis included 139 dead and condemnation of one more artist to a supervised life.

Without going into details or adducing further examples, we can recognize here something like a common genealogy: the disturbances usually possess a gradual and artificial origin, where a devout Islamist minority manipulates and purposefully promotes anger - until it reaches a level where an initially limited and local problem will dominate international media.

In theory, anti-insult demonstrations are not necessarily violent, yet "theatrical" violence is part and parcel of the protest repertoire. We observe here a parallel with the logic of terrorism: in both cases the gambit is to overvalue the status of the weak and the victim - who in today's world enjoys an ideological advantage - and to produce a multiplier effect where a few activists garner a disproportionate media effect. The protest serves at once to demonize the West and to propagate conservative or fundamentalist readings of Islam.

One should from the above not conclude that Islam is more violent or anti-modern than other religions. What seems undeniable, however, is that the Muslim world is caught in a more serious and urgent cultural crisis than those affecting other civilizations - and this crisis includes violent, including terroristic manifestations. We are not the first to point out that this violence affects a much larger number of Muslims than of non-Muslims; far from diminishing the seriousness of the problem, it only exacerbates it.

What concerns us here, however, is that from the Muslim point of view symbolical violence inflicted (subjectively) seems to provoke greater indignation and protest than physical violence. Blasphemy, which we might define as "violation of God's rights", seems to instill greater pain in the Muslim community than any violation of its *human* rights in the Western sense. Again, illustrations will make the point. The genocide in Darfur in 2003-2006 (and earlier, that of the Iraqi Kurds 1987-89), the massacres of the Afghan civil wars (1989-1996 and again since 2003), of the Syrian and earlier of the Lebanese civil war (2011-present and 1975-1990, respectively) and many

other instances of crimes and serial murder against Muslim civilians, have all attracted much less protest of the *umma* than the burning of a Qur'an by a marginal Florida pastor in: for certain groups of Muslims, symbols (after all no more than arbitrary signs that refer to something more concrete) are apparently worth more than human lives. Anti-Islamic groups in the West are eager to provide ammunition to their anger.

Mutual manipulation of religious symbols has stirred up a war of representations. When thinking of strategies to depolarize this situation, we meet a considerable challenge in the sacralization of several mundane subjects, mere verbal reference to which is already interpreted as intolerable insult to Islam. Thus issues such as the origins of Islam or the integrity and "ahistorical" immutability the Qur'an, but also the Prophet's sexual life or in general any criticism of any aspect of Muhammad, become untouchable subjects, sheltered against any criticism – whether playful or serious, external or intra-Islamic. The same may be observed regarding representation of the image of Muhammad – although this is in fact a relatively recent taboo: an "invented tradition".²⁹ This new orthodoxy differs from the wider latitude that existed in earlier times.³⁰

The tendency to delegitimize criticism of Islam

The taboo on the person of the Prophet is an important issue that helps establish a criterion to differentiate unacceptable racism from legitimate criticism. Drawing the line between the legitimate and the prohibited in human behavior is obviously conditioned by the criteria used. And how could these criteria be exempt themselves from the same criticism? This brings us back, then, to our initial question: how might one legitimately criticize Islam? The central dilemma seems to lie in the difficulty to differentiate critique of religion from criticism of Muslims as a group. We need to distinguish dogmas, beliefs and worldviews on the one hand, from individuals and groups on the other. A faith can be chosen but skin color, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and other identity characteristics cannot. Many people would agree that

²⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

³⁰ Two recent extreme examples were the planned attack on the fresco of San Petronio in Bologna (2002) that represents Muhammad suffering in hell the punishments imagined by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*; and pressures in 2008 to remove medieval Arab images from a Wikipedia article discussing the current trend in Islam to prohibit images of the Prophet.

anyone has the right to criticize ideas; but that to criticize a person for belonging to a group amounts to a discriminatory or even racist or sexist abuse. Since the Enlightenment we know that freedom of expression is a constitutive element of modernity and a condition for progress; and we hold that equality between citizens expresses our dignity as human beings. One may publicly opine that the God of the Old Testament is a bigoted Being, spiteful and jealous (or even non-existent). However, he may not publicly express the view that the Jews, who developed the monotheistic concept, are the cause of all evil and must be exterminated. It is acceptable to reject the Yoruba religion of the Orishas, but it is not acceptable to argue that Blacks are an inferior race apt to be enslaved. The same distinction can and should be applied between Islam and Muslims.

This criterion to distinguish people from ideas provides a *prima facie* means to determine which expressions are legitimate and which are not (ignoring for now the issue if the unacceptable should be prohibited and punished by law or merely socially excluded as an undesirable and "politically incorrect" expression).

However, it is more complicated to apply the criterion when it comes to religion: for how is it possible to separate the believer from the content of his belief? The dilemma is even more acute with "totalitarian" religions – *i.e.* those who seek to regulate in detail and guide the life of the faithful and demand to be the central anchor of the believer's identity. Such is the case of Orthodox Judaism, certain Christian churches, and also Islam: there, elements of the content of religion itself also constitute elements of the collective identity of Muslims as a community.

If we cannot remove this overlap between idea and person, between tenets of the Islamic religion, open to criticism like any idea, and the community of Muslims, inviolable in the name of their human dignity, then we risk lose our standard of determining how far freedom expression goes. It would then be impossible to say that hate speech (*e.g.* in the case of *IoM*) is illegitimate, but that a high-quality artistic work (*e.g.* Rushdie's novels) or a scientific analysis which entails criticism (*e.g.* the text critical research of Luxenberg) should be exempt from such a ban.³¹

YouTube chose not to take down the *IoM* movie, reasoning that although the video criticized Islam as a religion, it did not denigrate Muslims as a group. The problem

³¹ Since 2006 British law restricts punishment for libel to cases with malicious intent (in the USA protection of free speech is even stronger). *Cf.* Ruthven (2012).

here is that the Prophet Muhammad, seen as the perfect exemplar of the holy as well as being a daily presence, almost a virtual (but ubiquitous) member of a Muslim's family, makes him also Islam's chief symbol: and this turns any criticism of him (particularly concerning his sexual behavior, transmitted in detail in the *ahadith*) into a violation of Muslim collective identity.³²

Obviously taboos also exist in the West either as residues of earlier and more restrictive eras or as new taboos. Two examples would be pedophilia,³³ and the Holocaust of the Jews. In 2006 the Arab European League (AEL, *Arabisch Europese Liga*) of activist Dyab Abu Jahjah, an "assertive" Muslim activist in Belgium and Holland, published cartoons of questionable taste (e.g. Anne Frank having sex with Hitler) in order to unmask an apparently double standard in the West. Immediately sued for anti-Semitic denigration, the action provided extensive negative publicity to AEL. However, the aim of their attack on Western "hypocrisy" was less to express any Muslim anti-Semitism than to gain equal status for Islamic taboos.³⁴ In other words, a breach of taboos that would lead to an expansion of taboos.

So we see an *inflationary process*. In a first stage it is the intentional insult that offends, next even serious criticism becomes illegitimate (e.g. French Leftist Islamologist Maxime Rodinson's biography of Muhammad, initially regarded as pro-Islamic);³⁵ finally the mere reference to a subject, unless prefaced with qualifications and with due deference, transmutes into insult to every member of the community. To accept the self-definition of any one religion as being above any rational inquiry, comes down to accepting *a priori* the old claim (which also existed in Christianity) that there exists a

³² YouTube blocked access to the film in Pakistan and some other Muslim majority countries, probably in a pragmatic *ad hoc* decision. US judiciary ordered in February 2014 removal of *IoM* from YouTube, concurring with the argument of one of the actresses whose life was threatened that she owned copyright on representations of her person: cf. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/26/us-google-youtube-film-idUSBREA1P1HK20140226> Reuters 02/26/2014. Most recently, lethal attacks have occurred in reaction to much lighter "transgressions", e.g. omission of the usual "peace be upon him" formula after mention of the Prophet's name.

³³ In the United States not only production but the mere possession of pedophile pornography – sexual photographs, and even drawings and stylized cartoons of young children – constitutes a crime: cf. Goode 2011.

³⁴ On the cartoon on the AEL website, cf. Belien (2006) and also http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caricatures_over_Mohammed_in_Jyllands-Posten. An exhibition of cartoons ridiculing the Jewish Holocaust was organized in Tehran in 2006 under the auspices of the Ahmadinejad government, ostensibly in response to the Danish cartoons. Similar to the above episode, this was officially justified by reference to "breaking taboos" though it transparently served ulterior political purposes.

³⁵ Cf. Rodinson (1961) and http://almuslih.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=256:the-maxime-rodinson-affair&catid=44:islam-in-history&Itemid=214.

sacred sphere for the prominence of which reason must bow - that there are things that the critical mind is not only unable to understand, but forbidden to approach. This means to believe in the primacy of revelation over reason. If one allows as a norm that representatives of any religion have the right to decide what counts as acceptable or unacceptable, one helps to establish or maintain the *a priori* supremacy of that religion.

Islam thus ends up looking like a totalitarian religion, intolerant of any dissent. That picture, however, is false, and itself the result of the hegemony in contemporary Islam of orthodox and Islamist currents over more moderate trends that follow more liberal and rationalist traditions within the faith. Historically these latter schools were characterized by openness to debate and to self-criticism. The defeat of the liberal current results from an internal struggle within Islam, fought in principle with theological arguments, but by groups of extremists also with weapons of intimidation and terror. Liberal critics currently face a situation in which theology and representation have become constitutive factors of the believers' collective identity: "If you criticize the sexual life of the Prophet, you insult me mortally, an insult that only blood can wash away." But defeat of the progressives is not fated to be irreversible.

We are therefore faced with a paradox: criticism of alleged intolerant and / or violent aspects of Islam turns into hate speech, and the critic who points at the propensity to violence is rhetorically transformed into author of incitement, whose views facilitate or even produce the very violence he or she criticized. Thus criticism of hate speech within Islam morphs into Islamophobic discourse, thus making any critical examination of Islam becomes illegitimate. It does not harm to restate that a critical (always respectful) approach to aspects of any faith should never defame the believer. However, it is also clear that the only way to keep a space for critical views lies in restoring the distinction between defamation of people and criticism of ideas.

2. The responsibility of the author

A second aspect inherent in the question of freedom to criticize Islam is to find out to what extent authors are responsible for the consequences of their words. The position that each author is answerable for all consequences of his words, direct and indirect, immediate and long term, is used by orthodox Muslims and Islamophile

publicists alike to delegitimize or censor works critical of Islam; it is used in the same way by Islamophobic publicists to combat Islam and even prone prohibition of Islamic worship.

The discussion about harmful effects attributed to *representations*, and the consequent responsibility of their authors or distributors, is not specific to religion. We encounter it in controversies as diverse as those about violent video games (do they increase the propensity to violence among young users?) and pornography (does access to representations of liberal and even violent sex increase the incidence of rape? or does representation helps to sublimate and therefore diminish expression of sexual practices deemed unacceptable?).³⁶ In the first case, the producer is an (at best poorly informed) criminal; in the second he has done nothing wrong.

Does the same logic apply *mutatis mutandis* also to creators and disseminators of religious representations?

The case of Nakoula is relatively simple: the author of *IoM* explicitly intended to produce anti-Islamic propaganda, and he got exactly the anti-Western reactions that nourish anti-Islamic resentment in the West that he had wished for. There is a correspondence between the intention and the result: hence the author is at least co-responsible for the ensuing violence. The artist's or researcher's responsibility for the effects of his creation becomes more complicated, however, when the author of statements or "blasphemous" representations has no malicious or violent intent, but his work includes expressions that are unacceptable from the point of view of guardians of the politically correct in Islam. In many countries, the law restricts the responsibility of the creator for the content of his creations. Democracies often follow the formula of "freedom of expression except in cases that affect public morality or incitement of racial hatred or insult of part of the population". Jurisprudence follows precedent and responds to changing social norms.

To not separate the artistic or scholarly creation from its author leads to absurdities that violate our sense of justice. In certain cases, of course, the responsibility of intellectuals for the tragedies of the 20th century is clear enough. One thinks of the *fellow travelers* who supported Stalinism, or of pro-Fascist or collaborationist artists and authors in the interwar era. The existentialist philosopher Heidegger, father of

³⁶ Incidentally the argument that representation of sex "objectifies" and is offensive to women is the exact equivalent of criticism of Islam being in itself an insult to Muslims.

postmodernism, was in the 1930s an active collaborator of the Nazis. He never disavowed his choice and bears undeniable responsibility for granting intellectual respectability to the National Socialist movement.³⁷ However, the argument for the intellectual's responsibility is often used in a far more elastic way. A couple of examples may highlight the dilemma. How should we evaluate Nazism's remoter sources of inspiration? Nietzsche, who died 33 years before the Third Reich (which he would have excoriated), was also the undemocratic and elitist philosopher of "overcoming of the human being" by the *Übermensch*; Richard Wagner extolled German mythology in his operas and was an open anti-Semite (his music is banned in Israel). Both geniuses were appropriated as precursors by Nazi ideologues. Would this make us posthumously blame Nietzsche for Auschwitz? This seems absurd...

However, not all cases are so absurd. We now know the extent of Communist crimes, in their time covered up by famous writers and philosophers such as G.B. Shaw, Gide or Sartre. Stalin pursued and eliminated millions of real and imagined opponents and "class enemies". Does his predecessor Lenin, the revolutionary who theorized the one-party regime and who established the secret police after the Russian Revolution, also bear guilt for the Gulag? And if Lenin is responsible, why not Marx? This is a sliding slope with no logical end. Voltaire and the Enlightenment philosophers developed the concepts of freedom of thought and of religion. Do they in some way share responsibility for the dead due to repression of riots against *IoM* in Pakistan and elsewhere? Theravada monks in Burma attack and burn alive Muslim shopkeepers and students – do we blame the Buddha? In his parable of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky imagines that Jesus Christ, had He returned, would have been arrested and executed as a prophet of insubordination and a heretic. Would Christianity's founders have recognized themselves in the stakes of the Inquisition? Was the Inquisition the atypical deviation into intolerance of a good faith - or did it reflect a violent trait inherent in the Catholic Church?³⁸

Inevitably a parallel imposes itself with the "thought crimes" of Islamophobic authors. In 2012 a Norwegian court sentenced to 21 years in jail Anders Breivik, who

³⁷ Martin Heidegger was also guilty of anti-Semitic behavior *e.g.* against his mentor Edmund Husserl, and of hypocrisy *e.g.* against his ex-girlfriend Hannah Arendt. About Heidegger's relationship with Nazism, cf. Farias (1989). Whether or to what extent the philosopher's behavior invalidates his philosophy is obviously another question altogether. For intellectual apologists of the USSR (Shaw, Gide, Sartre and others) cf. Lilla (2001) and Winock (1999).

³⁸ Dostoyevsky (1879).

had massacred over 60 people in his struggle against "Marxist multiculturalism" which according to him, was disarming the West against the specter of Islamization. Robert Spencer was accused of being one of the intellectual inspirations of the killer. Spencer, author of controversial books like *The politically incorrect guide to Islam* (2005) and *Did Muhammad exist?* (2012) as well as director of www.jihadwatch.com, is doubtless anti-Islamic. Breivik's 'manifesto' quoted him frequently. However, Spencer has never called for physical attacks against Muslims or Islamophiles, but rather looks for verbal duels to spread his positions. Is Spencer indirectly guilty of the massacre?³⁹

The illusionary same logic can be applied to Islamophile voices. Who, beyond the suicide terrorists themselves, is morally and intellectually responsible for 9/11? No doubt Osama bin Laden, who as he boasted, inspired and organized them. But what about Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), the Egyptian ideologue of jihadism who inspired Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri? Qutb was a radical voice within the Muslim Brotherhood, the same that produced Muhammad Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, deposed by a military coup in 2013, which at once outlawed the Brotherhood as a "terrorist organization". Jihadi terrorists, though, claim they do nothing but apply Allah's dictates of as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Would in last instance, then, the founder of Islam be guilty of violence committed by Muslims in the name of their religion? Such indeed is the intellectual genealogy traced by authors hostile to Islam such as Spencer and Pamela Geller to accuse it as an inherently violent and heinous faith: attempts to market an alternative "moderate", modernist and tolerant Islam, are for them no more than propaganda tricks. There could exist only one Islam and it is the opposite of the "religion of peace" advocated by Muslim apologists and their naïve backers. Such indeed is the viewpoint often promoted by anti-Islamic propagandists - though not by serious researchers such as Bernard Lewis or by more sophisticated critics of Islam such as Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer.

Muslims who reject violence naturally defend the opposed perspective: Islam is perfect but Muslims are not. Terrorists such as the perpetrators of 9/11 would have made a wrong and illegitimate reading of the sacred sources, and arrived at their acts by, ultimately, misunderstanding their own religion: one must not blame Islam for that.

³⁹ In a series of articles Robert Spencer attempted to prove that Anders Breivik's terrorist massacre in Norway in 2011 was aimed at destroying the anti-jihadist movement by associating it with Nazism. Cf. Spencer (2014), and related articles published around the same time. Cf. also <http://www.jihadwatch.org/rebuttals> and Greenfield (2011).

Such explanations are championed by a heterogeneous collection of believers – from liberals like Mohammed Arkoun to moderate and gradualist fundamentalists such as Yusuf el-Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan. Some non-Muslim sympathizers of Islam adopt a secularized version of the same argument. Jihadists would reach faulty or forced interpretations, and responsibility for Islamist violence belongs to those who provoke Muslims: Christian (or Jewish, Hindu or atheistic) Islamophobes, Orientalists, or Western colonialists and their intellectual paladins.⁴⁰

As observers trying to analyze the impact of ideas on immoral behavior, and to make sense of the cataclysms human beings inflict on each other in the name of ideas, we are therefore torn between two incompatible extremes: would the apostle of an ideology or religion (which in its original formulation was often deeply human, tolerant and peaceful!) actually be its guiltiest culprit? Or is he completely exempt from all liability? Whatever the outcome of this ethical dilemma, the most prudent position would be to absolve an author from responsibility for the effects of his or her ideas until proof of the opposite. Freedom of speech depends on maintaining a barrier between the author and the work. To prevent closing of the space for debate, it is essential to maintain the independence of the text *vis-à-vis* the author.

What has priority: the right to criticize or the right to not be offended? Five positions

The above remarks on the influence of ideas and representations on (in particular immoral) political behavior allow us to construct a taxonomy of attitudes on the dilemma about free speech *versus* religious freedom (including the Muslim believer's right not to be insulted in his faith). We may distinguish two "Islamic" positions, orthodox and liberal, and two "secularists" or "Western" ones, viz. universalistic and relativistic, along with a fifth non-ideological position derived from the sphere of conflict management.

⁴⁰ Yildirim (2007) and Hitchens & Ramadan (2010). Cf. <http://kurzman.unc.edu/islamic-statements-against-terrorism/qaradawi/>, Esposito (2002) and Said (2001).

(1) Orthodox Islam

The orthodox *or* conservative Islamic position argues that critique or satire of religion equals blasphemy or insult to God. Slandering or ridiculing the Prophet even more so since unlike God Muhammad can no longer defend himself, punish or forgive the offense - a task that now falls on the *umma*. This primacy of the honor of God, His Prophet and His religion has drastically limited the right to free expression in Islam. Without room for criticism, any "aggression" calls forth extreme reactions that paradoxically seem to confirm the very "Islamic intolerance" that critical authors intended to reveal in the first place.

This first position corresponds to the traditional Islamic one, and is shared by most *Islamists* and (probably, in theory) by the majority of the Muslim public, although only a minority mobilizes in protests.

(2) Liberal and modernist Islam

The opposite *Islamic, liberal and modernist* standpoint affirms that a strong religion cannot be harmed by inane insults: "Only the truth can hurt." Muslims should not fall into the trap of fighting hate with hate, but practice patience and tolerance. As for serious criticism, this should be addressed openly and fearlessly. It necessarily addresses the believers and not belief itself: unlike Islam, Muslims are not perfect. Muslim modernists want (in various degrees of radicalness) to reform Islam and cleanse it of retrograde aspects. There are heated discussions in books, conferences, and online, but these probably involve an educated and partially Westernized Muslim elite public.⁴¹

One must bear in mind that both these two currents represent only the two extreme poles of what in Islamic social reality is a continuous gamut of opinion. Literature is replete with testimonies from Muslims disgruntled with what they experience as a too lukewarm or accommodating religiosity, or who are scandalized by anti-Muslim aggressions supposedly "engineered" or "applauded" by the West, ensuing in radicalization. However, the opposite also exists. Researchers Ed Husain and Maajid Nawaz were Islamist radicals before they turned into moderate reformists. There are

⁴¹ Rushdie (2005).

former Muslims like Wafa Sultan or Ayaan Hirsi Ali whose criticism is so fundamental they can no longer be considered believers, but who still remain "cultural Muslims"; still others we may call "peripheral Muslims", such as Irshad Manji or the *Only Quran Muslims*.⁴²

(3) Western universalism

In the *West* the watershed runs today less between Left and Right than between universalism and relativism. *Universalists* tend to value freedom of expression above religious freedom. Democracy and Human Rights can only flourish in a context of near-absolute freedom of expression, including the freedom to criticize that may offend social or religious norms.⁴³ This rationalist and liberal position - in the eyes of his detractors "Enlightenment fundamentalism" - seems to confirm the conservative Islamic caricature of a West devoid of norms or God, fit and ripe for the kill. The universalistic position is defended by libertarians such as Noam Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens, Pascal Bruckner and other French "new philosophers" and by authors of Third World origin (not all of them Muslim) who found a more receptive home for their opinions in the West, such as Kwame Appiah, Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji.⁴⁴

(4) Relativist multiculturalism

The opposite pole is hard *relativistic multiculturalism*. Starting from the axioms that it is wrong to apply Western values to non-Western societies and that universal norms that are not culturally determined are impossible to find, relativists defend limits on freedom of expression, at least within Western society and about other cultures.

⁴² Ed Husain and Majid Nawaz later established the Quilliam Foundation, an anti-extremist NGO: Husain (2007); Nawaz (2013). Cf. Ibn Warraq (2003), Sultan (2009) and Manji (2003). Appiah (2005 and 2006) is philosopher of culture at Princeton and New York University.

⁴³ This stance has even been advocated by Noam Chomsky (1980) who lent his prestige to legitimize publication of negationist theses of Robert Faurisson by writing a foreword for his *Mémoire en défense*.

⁴⁴ French philosopher Pascal Bruckner (2007) introduced the concept of "Enlightenment fundamentalism" (which he defends) in his advocacy of Ayaan Hirsi Ali against Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash. His critique of the alleged facile pro-Third World relativism of the Western intellectual Left is in Bruckner (1983) and (2006). The viewpoints of Ali (2007) and (2010) and Manji (2005) has parallels with Appiah's liberal cosmopolitan universalism.

Criticism that approaches offense is to be rejected. Rejecting the values and practices of other communities violates not only the respect owed to their otherness, but upholding our own values (regarding which confusion reigns!) over and against those of the other would also threaten conflict: and, reminding us of the many unjust wars waged by western colonizers and imperialists multiculturalists warn that the wiser course is to avoid the risk of fresh injustices.

Again it is interesting to note the multiple subdivisions, overlays and transfers that exist in the secular field too. Thus the viewpoint defending the right of Muslim communities to determine in their own sphere - and dictate to their coreligionists - the boundary between the licit and the illicit may be inspired by epistemological or even moral relativism; on the other hand, many Christians and conservatives are quite absolutist in their own values and embrace pro-Islamic positions not out of any value relativism but because Islam's non-permissive values correspond with their own, or because of isolationism (*e.g.* John Esposito, Pat Buchanan, or Rowan Williams).⁴⁵ What is at stake from the Christian side seems sometimes a transposition of the old censorship that restricted the freedom to criticize Christian sacred cows into a desire to limit such freedom when speaking of the taboos of the Other. Last year's Orientalists are today accused of peddling caricatured representations of "the Orient". Today it is *legitimate* to *satirize Western taboos but no longer those of other cultures*. Perhaps feelings of guilt about the colonial past are thus exorcised. On the other hand, one suspects that some monocultural conservatives disguise their Islamophobia behind Enlightenment arguments, while actually blaming Islam collectively for the ills that afflict the West.

Despite occasional opacities (willful or not), the contrast between universalistic and relativistic perspectives is substantial. Western ambivalence concerning progressive and/or pro-Western Muslims who are critical of their own Islam, illustrates the gap between both philosophies. Salman Rushdie, Ibn Warraq, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji plus a small galaxy of other critical Muslim and apostate Muslim stars demand internal reform of Islam, reject anti-Semitism as well as the axiom of Islamic supremacy, claim rights in Islam for women, minorities, and gays, and seek to harmonize faith with modernity. Universalists applaud these celebrities and are eager to parade them as

⁴⁵ These three authors markedly differ among themselves, though they have in common a Christian orientation. The prolific student of Islam John Esposito, director of the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown, is Catholic, as is the paleoconservative politician Pat Buchanan, who sees Islam as a potential anti-modern ally. Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has defended incorporation of shari'a in British law for British Muslims.

"positive Muslims" who exemplify the potential of coexistence. They are *not* popular among Western relativists, who accuse them of generating problems between Muslims and others, and of being too ignorant or too westernized (if not bribed) to represent "authentic" Islam.

The exact opposite occurs with Muslim intellectuals closer to orthodoxy, who engage in dialogue all the while maintaining a more distant and critical stance vis-à-vis Western civilization, such as Tariq Ramadan: applauded by relativists such as Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash, he is kept at arm's length by more vigilant universalists such as feminist Caroline Fourest or socialist Paul Berman, always ready to detect in his writings or speeches signs of an anti-modern Islamism.⁴⁶

(5) Pragmatic peaceful coexistence

"It's not smart to offend those who may want to kill you": We can point at a fifth position that is less ideological and more guided by the need *to avoid destructive conflict* and to manage and solve them as they emerge. One can embrace the universal value of free expression and yet accept that under certain circumstances it must be limited: for violence must be avoided, and conflict needs to be resolved non-violently. Even though our values may be right, we still share in the responsibility towards the victims of their overly brutal imposition. This position appreciates results regardless of the justice of motives ("the end justifies the means") and thus differs from all previous viewpoints which, in varying degree are all deontological, i.e. mandating action based on righteous principles, regardless of consequences.

This classification obviously does not exhaust all existing and politically relevant views on the relationship between Islam and the West – we have in fact included only the relatively moderate! None of the five positions would accept intentional offense to groups of believers – but meanwhile they differ among themselves in their response to serious (scientific, philosophical or artistic) criticism of the contents of a religion regarded as inviolable by most Muslims. Two positions, Western and Islamic liberal universalistic, value freedom of expression above concerns for taboo: they also view the challenge of coexistence as a shared challenge for Muslims and infidels. Two other

⁴⁶ Fourest (2008). Cf. Berman (2009).

positions value hold protection of faith higher than freedom of expression: orthodox Islam does so in the name of the supremacy of revelation, and secular relativism on behalf of deference to Muslim “alterity”; they also hold in common Western responsibility for the failure of coexistence. The fifth, pragmatic, position peaceful coexistence values as supreme and may sin through exaggerated caution.

Virtual terrorism: Islamophobes against radical Islamists - two extremes seeking polarization

In the public storm caused by the *IoM* video as in other similar cases, offenders and offended are, in a first moment, exponents of extremist minorities: radical Islamophobes who want to provoke Muslims in general, and succeed in provoking radical Islamists. The former are often Christian (or, in some cases, secular, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist) fundamentalists or Fascists.⁴⁷ As for the latter, they include various streams. Impressionistically, activist Sunni salafis and jihadis and their acolytes seem to stand out. Muslim youth of Western and Central European big cities, poorly integrated and alienated from or antagonistic to Western values, are strongly represented, but one finds also converts and others.

It is important to remember that the ideological fringes are broader and more malleable than these ideologized cores. Not nearly all universalists are attracted to Islamophobia, nor are all observant Muslims to extreme Islamism. However, the radical currents dominate today’s discursive scene.

Islamophobes and Islamists possess each a relatively large and in all likelihood growing margin of supporters susceptible to their arguments. As yet each of these extreme poles represents only a minority. However, each exerts disproportionate influence over its own “constituency”, due to the consistency of their respective ideologies, and the general atmosphere of doubt and of loss of certainties and demoralization affecting their political competitors in the West and the Islamic world respectively.

What radical Islamophobes and Islamists have in common is that they both want

⁴⁷ Jewish anti-Islamic violence has occurred in terrorist acts (such as arson of mosques) of extremist settlers in the West Bank in the framework of their “price tag” policy. In India, radical currents of Hindu fundamentalist party *Bharatiyya Janata Party* and its Shiv Sena militia have been responsible for many instances of anti-Muslim violence. Buddhist-Muslim communal tensions recently exploded into anti-Muslim pogroms in western Burma against the Rohingyas, and southern Thailand against Malays.

to foster a clash of civilizations, a new religious war – which they believe they can win – to be fought by political and rhetorical or – for the extremists - military means. Not all who criticize or hate Islam want to "cleanse " the West of Muslims, but the trend is to press for limits on their influx, to force their assimilation and to empty public space of Islamic content. In parallel, not all Islamists reject all West-associated values, but their trend is to restrict democracy and human rights to issues considered compatible with shari'a, and to establish "liberated zones" free of Western influence and governed by Islamic law. Both ideologies can be considered fundamentalist, convinced of the truth of their own belief and of the reality of a nefarious cultural, demographic or economic "invasion", planned and executed by the 'enemy': the other civilization.

Followers of either camp understand their stakes as a zero sum game which the enemy is winning, and where the result will depend on an eleventh hour intervention of an "enlightened" minority to convince the ill-guided and/or indifferent majority of their own camp. Both Islamophobes and Islamists tend to pessimism on the prospects of coexistence with the other civilization, however, each considers fighting against (or converting) the moderates within their own community as the more pressing immediate task. In the medium term, though, war is inevitable and corresponds to the will of God or of History. Both also use mirror "ricocheting" provocation strategies that follow a logic similar to terrorism: (a) the "good community" hurts the "enemy camp" – speaking blasphemy functions as the verbal/symbolical pain-inducing equivalent of a violent terrorist act; (b) the insult leads the enemy to take revenge against the majority of this "block of the Good", from whose members came the original provocation; (c) revenge strikes the majority, and the pain inflicted brings about an ideological realignment between the tepid members of the "good" community with the positions of its radical "vanguard".

Within this strategy, a key tactic employed across the board is to formulate claims that are insoluble or impossible to fulfill without a total cultural war. One example is the demand often voiced by Geert Wilders of Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) to ban the Qur'an in the same way as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is banned in the Netherlands. Much more extreme is the Norwegian Anders Breivik who called for a violent campaign against multiculturalists. Obviously implementing any such program is incompatible with the principles of peaceful coexistence of diverse groups within a heterogeneous democratic society. A ban on the Qur'an would be absurd for any Muslim. Breivik's plan

would lead to a continent-wide civil war throughout Europe.

Equally, acceptance of the demands of extreme Muslim fundamentalists would mean the end of Western society. Thus Islamists demanded not just censorship and prohibition of *IoM* and punishment of its producers⁴⁸ - within American political and legal context, already unrealistic demands in themselves – they also blame the US and the West collectively for having allowed production of the movie. They demanded censorship, apology, and a promise of non-repetition, and on beforehand threatened violence in case their demands were not met. However, the demands are by their nature impossible to fulfill in a regime of free expression: no government could control the content of the Internet or YouTube without introducing a comprehensive regime of preventive censorship. This would not only pose technological challenges⁴⁹ but also be incompatible with the civil and human rights that underpin democratic society. Moreover, the very universalistic basis of modern democratic society would, in the event of acceptance of the ultimatum of the offended Muslims, dictate a further expansion of taboos: it would be just as impossible to legislate a prohibition to offend Islam as it was to outlaw in France the use of *only* the veil. The principle of equality obliged French lawmakers to ban from public space *all* "religious symbols" (crosses, Jewish kippa etc.). A similar universalistic logic, then, would require a ban on criticism of *any* religion.⁵⁰ That would open the door to totalitarian controls that would in no time put an end to open society. In the long term that would make society less creative because communicative social action is the very basis of human emancipation - not by coincidence humankind's evolutionary path most hateful to fundamentalists of all stripes!

⁴⁸ In the case of *IoM* the actors fear today for their lives. They say they were deceived, accepting roles in a film with an apparently innocent script, and that their voices were subsequently dubbed with messages insulting Islam: cf. Risling (2012).

⁴⁹ Cf. the difficulties encountered in China, Iran, Cuba and related regimes to deny their populations thirsting for freedom and information access to the forbidden fruits of the Internet.

⁵⁰ It is precisely in this sense that the Islamic Conference Organization, the "United Nations" of the Muslim states, would like to amend the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2013). : http://www.euro-islam.info/wpcontent/uploads/pdfs/islamphobia_rep_May_2010_to_April_2011_en.pdf. Cf. <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2012/11/new-calls-from-islamists-for-international-blasphemy-law-at-un>; Kern (2013).

Conclusions and recommendations

As noted in the beginning of this analysis, *IoM* is no exception. It is a symptom. We cannot turn a blind eye to the developments of the last decades - essentially since the end of the Cold War: an ascending line of ever more representative provocations of Islamophobic actors against the Muslim world. These provocations, understood by their perpetrators as a response to the supposed inassimilable and violent otherness of Islam have led to increasingly frequent violent reactions from the side of Islamists: thus they appear to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Islamophobic attacks are in general limited to the terrain of representation: words and imagery rather than physical acts, while radical Islamist reactions are often of a physical nature, imposing a higher price in blood and lives. This does not mean that Islamophobic acts have necessarily lesser impact. In the West the highest sensitivity refers to human life, while the Muslim world focuses on violations of a symbolic order - eventually the unrest triggered by novels, cartoons and videos perceived as blasphemous may end up having a high human price. We do not argue that without symbolic Islamophobic attacks such as the Muhammad cartoons or *IoM* there would be no Islamist "counterattacks" such as on Charlie Hebdo - only that Islamophobic acts throw oil on the fire. Additionally anti-Islamic "blasphemy" coming from the West is instrumental in radicalize the Islamic ideological spectrum, and provides ammunition to violent jihadis in their discussions with salafi and other non-violent Islamist currents.

Anyway, radical Islamists, with their reactions, tend to fall open-eyed into the traps laid by their anti-Islamic critics. Both want to stir up a war of civilizations.

Radical Islamists and Islam-haters are still some way from realizing this goal. Even so we see already severe side effects of their struggle: one of the most significant of these is the shrinking space for serious and non-malicious critique of Islam. This shrinkage is the outcome of physical intimidation by radical Islamists together with the verbal policing and censorship imposed in Western democracies by certain intellectuals and journalists: this Islamophile intelligentsia risks becoming a fifth column of "useful idiots" tethered to the cause of Islamism. To this one must add fear-driven self-censorship.

A society that restricts freedom of expression will eventually prohibit freedom of thought. Limiting the freedom of ideas sabotages society's resources to address the very

serious problems threatening human coexistence. It also diminishes our humanity. However, when freedom of expression is abused to damage the dignity of communities that make up this society, and causes feelings of loss and anger or even communal violence, there also occurs, beyond the immediate human suffering, a waste of social capital difficult to retrieve or rebuild. Few evil acts have a worse destabilizing potential than religious insults. And no other major religion is more obsessed with blasphemy than Islam. It is elementary that freedom to criticize is conditioned on some criterion to distinguish serious criticism from deliberate slander. That criterion, however, is not immediately identifiable. How to escape from this dilemma? To be effective, any depolarizing strategy would probably need to simultaneously combine three elements: to maintain in an attenuated form the outlawing of hate speech against religious communities and other identity groups; to protect unfettered freedom of expression for critique of religion; and to release critical Muslim and ex-Muslim authors and artists from their ghettoization-by-association with the Islamophobic Right, and to seriously engage their arguments.

(1) To accept of the ban on hate speech (but define it better)

The first step to tackle the problem is to recognize that it exists. We saw above the destructive entanglement of Islamophobic provocations and violent Muslim reactions, which seemingly confirm the anti-Islamic analysis, thus encouraging further provocations, new counter reactions, and fueling a vicious circle. In democratic countries a good portion of the public may well be prepared to mitigate freedom of expression to protect religious groups against insult. The first strategy would protect freedom of expression, but without unnecessarily alienating masses of Muslims, keeping in place the prohibition of *hate speech*, but defining it in a more restrictive way, *i.a.* assuming an author's good intention until proven otherwise. Intentions are notoriously difficult to prove, but such a clause would provide a protection for authors, artists and researchers whose work may involve *bona fide* criticism of Islam (or any other religion or philosophy): is key to protect or recapture this terrain.

(2) Muslims are entitled to protection, Islam not

Allegations by anti-Islamic observers of a prevailing Western blindness to Islamist excesses are unfortunately not baseless.⁵¹ Whether because of intimidation, colonial guilt, values confusion, principled relativism or of still others causes, the cases of passivity, excuses and cover-ups are quite numerous. A detailed analysis of these factors falls outside the scope of this article. The consequences, however, are negative. The popular perception that Islam is above the law can only encourage tolerance of the opposite – of coarse criticism or worse. Here the challenge is to combat the undue indulgence to a gamut of problematic expressions and behaviors on the part of traditional and militant Muslims - but to do so without falling into the traps of xenophobia or cultural protectionism.

(3) To retrieve and enlist the vanguard of "critical Muslims"

Lastly, two marriages of convenience need to be broken up: one, that of the conservative and monoculturalistic Islamists (who axiomatically believe their religion is supreme and the West decadent) with Western multiculturalists; and that of reformist and liberal Muslims with a certain Islamophobic Right that masquerades as progressive universalism. Automatic association of moderate, critical, progressive and pro-Human Rights democratic Muslims (as well as ex-Muslim "apostates" but who have culturally remained Muslim) with the Islamophobic Right is an important ideological resource for radical Islamists, as it turns the voice of the critical Muslim into that, innocent and despicable, of the *token* Muslim. That perception must be reversed. It is obvious but bears repeating that both the West and the causes of international peace and of non-violent resolution of conflicts have an interest in strengthening moderate Muslims. The critical Muslim fringe residing and operating in the West - often the only environment where they can operate safely – is a vanguard that constitutes a crucial resource in the fight against Islamophobia and anti-Western Islam at once. Those intellectuals in the West who reject these thinkers and activists should rethink their position and help win back this Muslim vanguard.

In the end reconquering space for a legitimate critique and contestation of

⁵¹ Many examples in Caldwell (2009), e.g. pp. 247-268, Chapter 9: "Tolerance and Impunity".

misogynistic and violent ideas and practices within the traditionalist and fundamentalist Islam can only be done by Muslims themselves - including the Westernized "fringe" mentioned above. What the West's non-Islamic civil society can do is to build up the credibility of the forces for coexistence, preparing a hospitable zone for critical Muslims who are *de facto* allies - and more generally for the Muslim communities living in our midst. Human Rights of Muslims must be assiduously protected but - and this is perhaps the most difficult challenge - without surrendering to the blackmail claim that the content of their religion forms an integral and unassailable part of Muslim identity: that would place an insuperable barrier immunizing Islam itself against the corrosive effect of critical reason. The immediate task here is therefore to dismantle the dangerous but ever more common argument - promoted by many Muslim states - that *criticism of Islam equals racism*. Legitimacy of the critique of religion was the most fundamental tenet of the Enlightenment. It is the original expression of freedom of thought and, thus constitutes the foundation of modernity. Censorship of ideas fatally leads in time to the closure of other spheres: *mutatis mutandis* it is tantamount to that "closing of the doors of free interpretation" (*ijtihad*) which condemned the Islamic civilization in the last millennium to its gradual decline and loss of creativity. Only the greatest possible freedom for all may lay the foundations for a new era of shared civilization between human beings of all faiths and beliefs.

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