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Religion

Freedom To Criticize Religion Is A Touchstone Of Free Expression

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Muslims should ‘simply ignore the crazy provocations,’ Gilbert Achcar says. He thinks that those who engaged in violent protests against the ‘Innocence of Muslims’ video did exactly what the video’s production team were hoping for as a result of their provocation. While Achcar strongly condemns Islamophobic hate material, he rejects any curtailment of free speech in the name of preventing blasphemy. ‘Freedom to criticize religion is a major touchstone of the right to free expression,’ he says in an interview with Farooq Sulehria for Pakistan’s Viewpoint Online.

Q: A decade after your book *The Clash of Barbarisms*, written in the aftermath of 9/11, it seems that the situation has only worsened. A caricature in an obscure newspaper, an immature video: anything can ignite a ‘clash of barbarisms’ disguised as a ‘clash of civilisations’. How would you analyse the ongoing wave of protests against the ‘Innocence of Muslims’ video in parts of the Muslim world?

Gilbert Achcar (GA): The clash of barbarisms that I analysed should not be seen through the lens of such incidents, but rather through much more serious issues such as Guantanamo, the invasion of Iraq, the torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, the increasing resort of the USA to extra-judicial killings, etc. Such events do indeed represent setbacks in the civilizing process.

The reactive barbarism found in the Muslim world is mostly incarnated by al-Qaida and other ultra-fundamentalist currents such as the Taliban (whatever goes under this umbrella) and exhibited in much more serious events than the recent demonstrations, such as the dreadful and endless sectarian killings in Iraq, for instance.

These antagonistic barbarisms feed off each other. Of course, the main culprits remain the most powerful: the world powers, the Western powers as well as Russia, which have created this dynamic of adverse barbarisms in the first place.

Q: In Pakistan, at least, the mainstream discourse is to point out Western, especially US, hypocrisy when it comes to freedom of expression. ‘Holocaust denial is a crime,’ is a common refrain. Your comment?

GA: First of all, let us set the record straight. Denying the Holocaust is a punishable offence only in some Western countries, not in all of them. It is not liable for punishment in the USA itself. Holocaust deniers freely publish their insanities in the US. This fact is disregarded by all those who use the ban on Holocaust denial as an argument against the USA.

As a matter of fact, there are laws against hate speech in all Western countries, except the US where the First Amendment to the Constitution prohibits any restriction to free speech. In upholding this principle, the US Supreme Court went so far, in 1977, as defending the right of the American Nazi Party to march through the village of Skokie a substantial proportion of whose inhabitants were Jewish concentration camp survivors. True, there have been violations of this right, particularly for Muslims in the US in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent surge of Islamophobia. But it remains always possible to fight back legally, and civil rights movements are active on such issues.

In Europe, when you feel you have been a victim of hate speech, you can resort to legal action. The question of Western double standard is usually raised with regard to Jews there, as it is much more difficult in Europe to

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articulate an anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic speech than an Islamophobic one. But this state of affairs owes to two factors.

The first is Europe's sense of guilt with regard to the Jewish genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany during the Second World War with much European complicity.

The second is that there are powerful Jewish institutions that react vigilantly against any gesture they deem anti-Semitic, often abusively by equating the critique of Israel with anti-Semitism. They are powerful, but note how they react. Not by holding violent demonstrations that would actually increase anti-Semitism, but by engaging in legal proceedings, publishing articles, and so on. Sometimes they even resort to what may be called intellectual terrorism in trying to intimidate critics of the Israeli state or Zionism with accusations of anti-Semitism.

This said, those who say that freedom of expression in the West is biased against Islam because it is less tolerant of anti-Jewish expression forget that the religion of the overwhelming majority in the West is not Judaism, but Christianity. When it comes to Christianity, Westerners are free to mock the Pope, Jesus Christ, or even God without fear of reprisals. Some of the major artistic and literary works in the West are satirical of Christianity or religion in general in ways that you can't imagine nowadays when it comes to Islam in the Muslim world.

True, there are some Christian fundamentalist groups that can resort to violence every now and then against anti-religious works. But they are completely marginal. Their violence is punished by law and it never reaches the level of what has been done these last days in the name of religion, which is matched only by the violence of Jewish fundamentalist colonial settlers in Palestine. Moreover, one should not forget that freedom of expression in Europe – in the UK in particular – has been of much greater benefit to Islamic fundamentalists of all brands who sought a refuge there fleeing oppression in Muslim countries than it has to people committing provocations such as those we are discussing.

Anyone incensed by symbolic violence, such as the video in the US or cartoons in France, should retaliate with symbolic violence in the same way or with peaceful protest. Not through physical violence. Resorting to physical violence against a symbolic act is a sign of intellectual weakness. You remember how the Taliban destroyed the gigantic Buddhas in Bamyán. These Buddhas were a World Heritage Site. Did Buddhists react violently? In Egypt and Nigeria, Christians and churches have been repeatedly and bloodily attacked in recent months. Did you see violent demonstrations of Christians worldwide retaliating against Muslim countries? People appreciate the difference between the lunatic fringe that carries out attacks on Christians and the general Muslim population. Muslims should also realise that the violent Islamophobic lunatic fringe in Western countries is marginal, actually much more marginal than the violent Islamic fundamentalist lunatic fringe in Muslim countries.

Crazy provocations like the "Innocence of Muslims" film or the burning of Korans by the crackpot Terry Jones are best ignored. They are so stupid that they don't deserve any reaction at all. The greatest service one can render to these provocateurs is to respond wildly to their provocations. Agitators are successful when they are able to arouse the feelings of the targeted group. This is why some people rightly argue that the ban on Holocaust denial in France, for instance, is counter-productive. Due to that ban, French Holocaust deniers have become very famous in France, whereas hardly anybody knows the name of US Holocaust deniers in the USA. Had nobody reacted to Terry Jones's damn-fool provocations, they would have remained unknown, as have thousands of such anti-Islamic utterances. Had nobody paid attention to him, he would not have carried on his dreadful farce. These lunatics have an Islamophobic agenda. Muslim political forces that react in the violent way that we have seen actually reinforce the very Islamophobia against which they protest.

Salman Rushdie's kind of work falls into a different category, of course. It cannot be dismissed as rubbish. He is a major contemporary writer. However, his *Satanic Verses* are very innocuous indeed compared to satires of Christianity, or even Judaism for that matter, which are freely available in the West.

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Q: Since the Salman Rushdie affair there have been the Danish cartoons, Geert Wilders' film, and now the film produced in the US. Every time we see wild massive reactions. How do you explain that?

GA: The fact is, very obviously, that certain political forces exploit such events to agitate for their cause, as Khomeini did in the case of the Rushdie affair. He never read Salman Rushdie's book, in the same way as most demonstrators against the anti-Islam film have not seen it. It is always the same story: some political forces exploit such occasions by stirring up the raw feelings of politically illiterate people in order to push their own political agenda. Fundamentalist forces have always seized upon such provocations. This is how they build their influence.

Q: In Pakistan, a common idea peddled by the government, Islamists and mainstream media is to demand worldwide UN legislation banning blasphemy? What do you think of this demand?

GA: I am hundred percent against it. The notion of blasphemy is a medieval notion. Those who make such a demand want to bring us back to the Middle Ages. If you want to prohibit criticism of religion, you will have to prohibit it for all religions. To implement a ban on blasphemy one will have to proscribe a huge number of works of literature, art and philosophy accumulated over many centuries in all languages, including Arabic of course. Such works are presently banned in the Arab world, but this is a testimony to the lack of freedom of expression.

The freedom to criticize religion is a major touchstone of the right to free expression. As long as a society does not tolerate this freedom, it has not achieved freedom of expression. It is a duty of all people committed to democratic freedoms to raise their voices against barbaric reactions to lunatic provocations. Capitulation to religious demagoguery will entail a huge cost at all levels. Once set in motion this process of curtailment of free speech will have no limit. Who will decide what is blasphemous and what is not?

Q: The demonstrators in Pakistan targeted symbols of wealth (banks, cars, ATM machines) or Western culture (cinemas, theatres). Some people view these violent actions in the Muslim world as part of a wider political conflict between the West and the Muslim world. What is your opinion?

GA: I disagree. Violence can be understandable under certain circumstances when people are demonstrating against social and economic assaults on their livelihood or in protest against actual slaughter, massacres, invasions, or occupations perpetrated by Western powers, or the Zionist occupation in Palestine. And yet, the fact is that many real massacres committed by Western powers or Zionists did not lead to any comparable reactions. The truth is that the violence on display is above all a political exploitation by fundamentalists of a provocation for utterly reactionary purposes.

Q: The left in most of the Muslim countries is a small force and is often caught in a strange situation during such crises. While the left, in Pakistan for instance, condemns racist provocations, it advocates curtailment of free speech with regard to religion. What do you think of this attitude?

GA: We are reaping today the result of the left's failure over many decades to raise the basic secular demand of separation of religion from state. Secularism – including freedom of belief, religion, and irreligion – is an elementary condition of democracy. It should be, therefore, an elementary part of any democratic project, let alone a left project. But most of the left in my part of the world, the Arab region, has capitulated on this issue.

For instance, in Egypt, large sections of the left, including the radical left, have all but dropped the term secularism from their vocabulary. Ironically, when the 'Islamist' Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited Egypt, he stated publicly that he stood for secularism, to the chagrin of the Muslim Brotherhood.

If the left wants to challenge the hegemony of Islamic forces and develop a counter-hegemonic movement in the

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political, social and cultural spheres, it must fight resolutely for secularism as well as against gender oppression – another fight from which many on the left also shy away in fear of ‘hurting the feelings’ of the believers. This is a self-defeating strategy.

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