

## **Hobhouse Memorial public lecture**

### **The Politics of Culture Talk in the Contemporary War on Terror**

*Date:* Thursday 8 March 2007

*Time:* 6.30-8pm

*Venue:* Hong Kong Theatre, Clement House

*Speaker:* Professor Mahmood Mamdani

*Chair:* Professor Paul Gilroy

I want to present four propositions in the course of the next hour. The *first* is that every culture, without exception, is historical. The *second* is that cultures do not grow in separate containers called civilizations. The claim that they do should be seen as part of an attempt to politicize culture, that is, to harness culture to a political project. *Third*, the continuing ‘clash of civilizations’ – including its distinctive European version – is better understood not as a defense of civilization but as the ideological arm of a larger political project, the War on Terror. *Finally*, for those interested in developing an effective counter to hate movements organized as political projects, I suggest developing an intellectual and political, rather than a legal, strategy.

When the event we know as 9/11 happened, I was in New York City. As the weeks rolled by, I read the American Press to try and make sense of the kind of debate that was developing. I was struck by reports that more and more Americans were going to bookshops to buy copies of the Qur’an, hoping to find in this text a clue to why suicide hijackers had flown planes into New York’s Twin Towers on 9/11. Soon the *New York Times* was telling us that the Qur’an was amongst the top-selling books in American bookshops. In the weeks that rolled by, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and then, in two years, Iraq. Like others, I knew that President Bush claimed to have a direct connection with God; his public speeches were often peppered with biblical language. I wondered how many Afghanis and Iraqis were going to bookshops to

buy copies of the Bible to gain an understanding into the motivation of those who were raining bombs on them. I doubted if there were any. So I asked myself – why the difference? Why were more and more Americans looking for an explanation of political violence in the Qur'an, but not Iraqis or Afghanis or, for that matter, people in Uganda – which is where I come from?

The difference, I realized, lay in the nature of the public debate in the U.S. The public debate that followed 9/11 was defined by two prominent semi-official intellectuals, Samuel Huntington of Harvard University and Bernard Lewis of Princeton University. As in every debate, their disagreement unfolded within a common frame. The ground they shared has come to define political “common sense” in the United States. This common sense is driven by a presumption that the world we live in is divided in two: between those modern and those pre-modern. It is said that those modern make their culture; they have a reflexive attitude to it; they can separate the good from the bad, build on the good and correct the bad; their culture develops historically; and the story of that historical development is what we call progress. The pre-modern peoples, in contrast, are said to be born into a culture; they are said to have a tendency to internalize their culture rather than have a critical attitude to it. Rather than make their culture historically, they seem condemned to live it uncritically, and content to pass it on from one generation to another. Pre-modern peoples are said to wear culture as a badge, or to suffer from it, like a twitch, even a fever. That fever used to be thought of as tropical, now it is more likely to be imagined as desert fever. Prior to 9/11, Africans were considered the quintessentially pre-modern people; now the characterization is more likely to be used with regard to Muslims. It is said that except for a founding prophetic moment and some monuments, Muslims tend to live their culture as a destiny. The claim is that you can read the politics of Muslims from their culture.

The debate between Huntington and Lewis was on the question: Who is the enemy? Samuel Huntingdon argued that we are at the onset of “a clash of civilizations, ” that the Cold War was a parochial affair, a civil war inside the West; the real war, the war between civilizations, is coming. At its core, this will be a war with Islam, for Islam’s borders, wrote Huntington, are bloody. From this point of view there is no such person as a “good” Muslim: every Muslim is potentially bad.

Bernard Lewis disagreed. Lewis advised the American administration not to take on Islam and Muslims head on. He said that it was vital that the United States make a distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims and that it not confront Muslims directly but identify good Muslims, organize them, resource them, and get them to confront and quarantine the bad ones. The Iraq war was supposed to be a realization of this inspiration. It was said that once bad Muslim were overthrown good ones would rise to the occasion, as indeed Eastern Europeans had done; they would garland American soldiers and that would be the dawn of democracy in Iraq. But, lo and behold, the history of Iraq since 2003 is testimony to thousands, even millions, of so-called good Muslims turning bad overnight. Anybody who followed the public discussion in the US about good and bad Muslims soon realized that good and bad were not adjectives describing the attitude of Muslims to Islam. They were actually adjectives describing Muslim attitudes to Western power. They were not cultural adjectives; they were political adjectives. Simply put, good Muslim became a label for pro-Western Muslims and bad Muslim for those anti-Western. I call this Culture-Talk.<sup>1</sup> Culture-Talk was and is self-serving. It was convenient because it conveniently removed the US from the picture; and it conveniently explained politics

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion on Culture Talk and the historicity of contemporary political Islam is elaborated in Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*, New York: Double Day, Random House, Three Leaves Press, 2005, chapter 1.

as not the result of a relationship between two or more persons, but as the inevitable outcome of the culture of one party.

It is as if you slap me and I explain it as the result of your culture. There is something wrong with that explanation, because it has removed the relationship between you and me from the picture and obscured its history. ***This, then, is my first point:*** all culture, like all politics, is historical; all, without exception. It is not a particularly profound point. Rather, it is simple, and should be obvious, but is not. One would have thought this was settled with the struggle against colonialism. That it is not shows that the power of ideas does not simply flow from their internal consistency and explanatory power, but also from their relationship to the world of power.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. There is no doubt of the identity of those who had hit the World Trade Centre. There is also no doubt of the existence of political Islam, nor about the existence of a tendency in political Islam – called *jihadi* Islam – that has embraced political violence as the way to change the world. So is culture unimportant? I don't think so. What I want to dispense with is not the notion of culture but the idea that the culture of some peoples is historical and that of other peoples is not. I simply think that culture has to be understood historically.

Political thought, such as political Islam, has also to be understood historically. To understand contemporary political Islam, one needs to locate it across both time and space. If you look at the development of political Islam from a post-9/11 perspective, it is clear that its century-long journey from 1857 was most influenced by three major thinkers. All of them confronted Western power and Western domination as a common problem. The first was the Iranian thinker Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Al-Afghani encountered Western colonialism as power and repression in post-1857 India. He argued that the colonization of a society from the outside

was *prima facie* evidence of its internal weakness; so he concluded that to confront an external enemy required confronting internal weaknesses before anything else. Al- Afghani's solution was to open up the public arena and to bring large masses of Muslims into public life. From this point of view, social participation would reform the state.

For a hundred years from the time of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in the middle of the nineteenth century to Mohammed Iqbal and Mohammed Ali Jinnah in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic political thought had been predominantly community-based, and had seen the community, the *umma*, as the driving force of change. A major shift happened with the Indian thinker, Abu A'la Mawdudi. Mawdudi left post-partition India for Pakistan, but found the Promised Land as banal as what he had left behind in India; except for the fact that this was a land with a Muslim majority who bore Muslim names and practiced Muslim rituals, there seemed to be no difference between Pakistan and India. Mawdudi said this was Na-Pakistan, not yet Pakistan; worse still, Napak-istan, the land of the impure. Mawdudi lost confidence in the *umma*; he lost confidence in changing society through expanding social participation and in the end arrived at a statist project. He became convinced that to change society you first had to capture power in the state; you couldn't leave Muslims to themselves; they would have to be *made* into ideological Muslims through a political project driven by an Islamist state with an Islamist constitution. Mawdudi became preoccupied with the question of power. Political Islam, a participatory project for a century after al-Afghani, became a top-down conspiracy with Mawdudi.

Mawdudi was a strong influence on Sayyid Qutb of Egypt, the third thinker who I think has critically shaped political Islam. Even more than Mawdudi, Qutb is the standard bearer of radical political Islam. When I read Sayyid Qutb's book, *Signposts*, I was struck by the kind of resonance it produced in a person like me, that is, one who came of political age in the 1960s and

70s. Sayyid Qutb says in the introduction to *Signposts* that he wrote this for the Islamist vanguard; I thought I was reading a version of Lenin's *What is to be Done*. And when I read the text and encountered Sayyid Qutb's main argument that you must make a distinction between friends and enemies, because with friends you use persuasion and with enemies you use force, I thought I was reading Mao Zedong on the correct handling of contradictions amongst the people.

Are we to understand Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, as part of a linear tradition called political Islam? Are we to accept Huntington's and Bernard Lewis' contention that the history of thought is best understood as developing inside containers called civilizations; one Islamic, another Hindu, another Confucian, another Christian? The more I read about Mawdudi's embrace of the state and Sayyid Qutb's distinction between Friend and Enemy, the more I realized that I could not understand either of them outside of their times. Was not Mawdudi's disillusionment with Islam as a social project and his embrace of a statist project part of a larger shift that had occurred in different types of nationalism, religious and secular? Was not Sayyid Qutb's embrace of political violence in line with a growing romance with armed struggle in movements of national liberation in the '50s and '60s – many driven by a presumption that armed struggle was not only the most effective form of struggle but also the only genuine mode of struggle? The fact is that both Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb were involved in multiple conversations: they were in a debate not only with Islamic intellectuals, whether contemporaries or of previous generations, but also with contending intellectuals anchored in other modes of political thought. And the main competition then was Marxism-Leninism, a militantly secular ideology which influenced both their language and their method of organization and struggle.

But the romance with violence goes deeper than Marxism. We need to recognize that the embrace of political violence is at the centre of political modernity. No century in recorded history has been more violent than the twentieth century. Since the French Revolution, violence has been understood as essential to progress. Remember Marx's famous dictum: revolution is the midwife of history. Romance with political violence marked the anti-colonial revolution that came with the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war; it was shared by an entire generation of political activists and intellectuals, both secular and religious. It was not specific to Sayyid Qutb or to radical political Islam. The more you think of this, the more the idea that some intellectuals do not live in the world but inside containers called civilizations – because they are Muslim, or Hindu, or Confucian – sounds more and more bogus.

Let us look at this historically. We can date the beginning of modern colonialism from 1491. We may be able to speak before 1491 of civilizations as separate containers, with transactions at their borders, but no longer after 1491. Globalization begins with modern colonialism, for modern colonialism break the levies of cultural life. Even if European intellectuals – those born and working in European languages – could continue to function exclusively in European languages and think of the European experience as universal, this luxury was not available to intellectuals from the colonized world. For the colonized intellectual, it became a matter of necessity, indeed of survival, to function in languages other than one's native tongue. The colonized intellectual had no choice but to go universal, which meant to work in more than one family of languages, and become immersed in a deterritorialized culture. We need to distinguish between culture and politics. Politics is overwhelmingly territorial, as in the expression geopolitical. But not culture. The rupture between culture and territory has always been there, but it has been particularly radical since 1491.

I want to make one more observation on the century that preceded 9/11. Neither Mawdudi nor Sayyid Qutb were religious intellectuals; they came neither from the ulama nor from the mullahs. Both were non-religious intellectuals; Mawdudi was a journalist; Sayyid Qutb was a literary critic. It is worth noting the fact that none of the key intellectuals of contemporary political Islam – from al-Afghani to Mawdudi to Said Qutb to Ali Shariati in Iran – have come from the religious domain. In this they resemble key intellectuals that have shaped contemporary political Hinduism, even political Zionism. How does one explain this?

To understand why it was so easy for non-religious intellectuals in Islam to come into the religious domain, we have to understand that we were dealing with a religion organized differently from Christianity. Western Christianity, particularly Catholicism, has historically been organized on the model of the Roman empire; and Protestantism has been organized on the model of the nation state. There is an institutionalized hierarchy of power inside the Church, from the floor to the ceiling. Organized power in institutionalized religion has historically functioned parallel to organized power in the state. Part of the question of secularism in the West has been that of policing the line of demarcation between two different powers, in the state and in the Church.

There is no such religious hierarchy in Sunni Islam. There is only the prayer leader, not even a priesthood. In spite of attempts by states to create a hierarchy from the top-down there really isn't one. This was also true of Shi'a Islam until the creation of *vilayat-i-faqih* by Ayatollah Khomeini. I think of Ayatollah Khomeini's innovation as preemptive, as a safeguard against intellectuals from the secular domain, intellectuals like Ali Shariati. We may also note that Ayatollah Khomeini's innovation is no longer universally accepted in Shia Islam. The most

prominent challenge has come from Ayatollah Sistani, who has argued for religious leaders to function as a moral presence outside the state, and not as a political force in the state.

Let me recapitulate my two main points. The *first* is that every culture, without exception, is historical. The *second*: cultures do not grow in separate containers called civilizations. The claim that they do should be seen as part of an attempt to politicize culture, to harness culture to a political project. This is my *third* objective in this talk: I intend to survey the more immediate present, so as to convince you that the continuing ‘clash of civilizations’ – especially its distinctive European version – is better understood as the ideological arm of a larger political project, the War on Terror. I will take as my reference the controversy around the Danish cartoons, an episode that signaled the onset of a European version of the clash of civilizations.

### **Blasphemy and Bigotry**

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

In some Muslim-majority countries, especially where Islamists provided the only effective opposition, governments were eager to take ownership of demonstrations, even

to encourage them. The result was that in countries like Egypt and Syria the anti-cartoon demonstrations seemed as if they were officially sanctioned. The most extreme case was that of Saudi Arabia, where government-printed pamphlets encouraged one and all to join the demonstrations, giving them an air of being not just sanctioned but even orchestrated by government. In some other countries, like Pakistan, the government was outflanked by the Islamist opposition. And in yet other countries, like Nigeria, the cartoon demonstrations seemed to bring back to life old unresolved issues, particularly the position of minorities in a federal set up, Christian Ibos in the north and Muslim Hausa-Fulanis in the east.

In Europe, one witnessed the curious effect that, whereas free speech was the rallying cry behind the support for the publication and re-publication of the cartoons, there was a little demonstration in practice of free speech, of debate, or of dissent from the politics of the cartoons. Curiously, the most audible dissent came from governments, such as the British and the American government, and not from civil society, nor from intellectuals, with a few notable exceptions, such as Gunter Grass in Germany.

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

reconstituted conceptually, before it can be fought for politically. To explore that conceptual ground, I would like to begin by making a distinction between blasphemy and bigotry.

### **Blasphemy and Bigotry**

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

Just a few weeks after the Danish cartoons were published, the German writer Gunter Grass was interviewed in a Portuguese weekly news magazine, *Visão*.<sup>2</sup> In that interview, Gunter Grass said the Danish cartoons reminded him of anti Semitic cartoons in a German magazine, *Der Sturmer*. The story was carried in a *New York Times* piece,

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, February 17, 2006, p. E7

which added that the publisher of *Der Sturmer* was tried at Nuremberg and executed. I am not really interested in how close was the similarity between the Danish and the German cartoons, but more so in why a magazine publisher would be executed for publishing cartoons. One of the subjects I work on is the Rwanda genocide. Many of you would know that the International Tribunal in Arusha has pinned criminal responsibility for the genocide not just on those who executed it but also on those who imagined it, including intellectuals, artists and journalists as in RTMC. The Rwandan trials are the latest to bring out the dark side, the underbelly, of free speech: its instrumentalization to frame a minority and present it for target practice.

We need to make a distinction between two kinds of bigotry, petty and grand. I characterize ethnocentrism, including discrimination against individuals, as petty bigotry. Grand bigotry, in contrast, is the stuff of demonization and the fuel of hate movements. It provides bricks and mortar for a hate ideology, which holds up, caricatures, frames and targets a minority as responsible for what is wrong with the world. Contrast, for example, individual racial discrimination with the organized racism of the Ku Klux Klan, or petty and grand apartheid in South Africa. Even when it comes to discrimination against entire groups, it is instructive to contrast anti-Semitism prior to the Nazis with Nazi anti-Semitism, which pointed to Jews as the explanation for what is wrong with the world.

Bigotry can be expressed in any language, religious or secular. Bigotry formed an important strand in the Old Testament religion that has watered the larger Jewish-Christian-Islamic tradition. In the words of Richard Webster, who has done an important study on the subject, the zeal of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Amos, Ezekiel

and Jeremiah, to serve the God of Israel “ goes hand in hand with their rage to denounce the gods of every other religion – especially the religion of the Canaanites – as inferior and evil.”<sup>3</sup>

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

### **Blasphemy and the Criticism of Religion**

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

To understand why blasphemy was experienced as a liberating force, we need to historicize and particularize it. Blasphemy was aimed at the Church as an institutional power, which is why it is more of a European than an American tradition. I have already pointed out that institutionalized religion in medieval Europe was organized as a form of

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, p. 36

hierarchical power, with an authority from the floor to the ceiling. No earthly place symbolized the Church as an institutionalized power more than Calvin's Geneva. Every act was governed by rigid spiritual rule: drunkards, dancers and adulterers were excommunicated; a child who struck his parents was beheaded; and men and women who transgressed Calvin's code were burnt at the stake. R. H. Tawney wrote of it as "a city of glass, in which every household lived its life under the supervision of a spiritual police."<sup>4</sup> In this context, blasphemy was a weapon against religiously-sanctioned terror.

It is blasphemy which gave birth to the great ideals of the Puritan movement in North America; the Puritan motto was that "laws of god should be written not upon tablets of stone, but upon the individual heart of every true believer."<sup>5</sup> The puritan quest shifted the locus of individual morality from external constraint to internal discipline. This history displaced both the Pope and the Scriptures with inner conscience. The Christ of scriptures was to become the "Christ within," a doctrine pioneered by the Quakers.<sup>6</sup> Though blasphemy marked the moment of birth of the New World, the New World was not particularly receptive to blasphemy. The big change was political: Puritans and other Protestant denominations were organized more as congregations and sects, more like voluntary associations, than as hierarchical churches. Unlike in Europe, religion in the rapidly developing settler democracy in the United States was very much a part of the language of the American Revolution and of the public sphere. My point is that the European experience has to be seen as more the exception than the rule. Those who would elevate blasphemy as central to the practice of free speech need to be aware

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<sup>4</sup> R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, cited in Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, p. 32

<sup>5</sup> This notion claimed inheritance from St. Paul who in turn got it from Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel. See, Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, pp. 27-28

<sup>6</sup> See, Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Penguin, 1975

that its resonance is historically limited to places where institutionalized religion represents a religiously sanctioned earthly power.

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

My first example dates back to 1967 when Britain's leading publishing house, Penguin, published an English addition of a book of cartoons by France's most acclaimed cartoonist, Siné. The Penguin edition was introduced by Malcolm Muggeridge. Siné's *Massacre* contained a number of anticlerical and blasphemous cartoons, some of them with a sexual theme. Many book sellers, who found the content offensive, conveyed their feelings to Allan Lane, who had by that time almost retired from Penguin. Though he was not a practicing Christian, Allen Lane took seriously the offense that this book seemed to cause to a number of his practicing Christian friends. Here is Richard Webster's account of what followed "One night, soon after the book had been published, he went into Penguin's Harmondsworth warehouse with four accomplices, filled a trailer with all the remaining copies of the book, drove away and burnt them. The next day the Penguin trade department reported the book 'out of print'."<sup>7</sup> Now, Britain has laws against blasphemy, but neither Allan Lane nor Penguin was taken to court. Britain's laws on blasphemy were not called into action. Two issues, in particular, interest me here.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, p. 26

One, Allan Lane had internalized as civility what the law prescribed as externally enforced restraint. Second, the internalization of legal restraint as civility is key to forging a framework for peaceful coexistence. To put it differently, the existence of political society requires the forging of a political pact, a compromise. It is not as much the restraint imposed by laws that reflect the terms of this compromise, but their internalization as civility that is key to peaceful day-to-day social existence.

My second example is from the United States. It concerns a radio show called *Amos 'n Andy* that began on WMAQ in Chicago on 19 March 1928, and eventually became the longest running radio program in broadcast history. From one point of view, *Amos 'n Andy* could be said to be a white show for black people, a show conceived by two white actors who mimicked the so-called Negro dialect to portray two black characters, Amos Jones and Andy Brown. *Amos 'n Andy* was also the first major all-black show in mainstream U.S. entertainment. The longest running show in the history of radio broadcast in the U. S., *Amos 'n Andy* gradually moved from radio to T.V. Graduating to prime time network television in 1951, it became a syndicated show after 1953.

Every year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) protested against the racist character of the portrayal that was the show. Giving seven reasons “why the Amos 'n Andy show should be taken off the air,” the NAACP said the show reinforced the prejudice that “Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest,” that every character in the all-Black show “is either a clown or a crook.” “Negro doctors are shown as quacks and thieves,” Negro lawyers “as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics,” and Negro women “as cackling,

screaming shrews ... just short of vulgarity.” In sum, “all Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind.” But CBS disagreed. You can still read the CBS point of view on the official Amos ‘n Andy website which still hopes that Black people will learn to laugh at themselves: “Perhaps we will collectively learn to lighten up, not get so bent out of shape, and learn to laugh at ourselves a little more.”<sup>8</sup>

The TV show ran for nearly 15 years, from 1951 to 1965. Every year the NAACP protested, but every year the show continued. Then, without explanation, CBS withdrew the show, in 1965. What happened? In 1965 the Watts riots happened, and sparked the onset of a long, hot summer. The Watts riots were triggered by a petty incident, an encounter between a racist cop and a black motorist. That everyday incident triggered a riot that left 34 persons dead. Many asked: What is wrong with these people? How can the response be so disproportionate to the injury? After the riots the Johnson administration appointed a commission, called the Kerner Commission, to answer this and other questions. The Kerner Commission Report made a distinction between what it called the trigger and the fuel: the trigger was an incident of petty racism, but the fuel was provided by centuries of racism. The lesson was clear: the country needed to address the consequences of a history of racism, not just its latest manifestation. Bob Gibson, the St. Louis Cardinals pitcher, wrote about the Watts riots in his book *From Ghetto to Glory*. He compared the riots to a “brushback pitch” – a pitch thrown over the batter’s head to keep him from crowding the plate, a way of sending a message that the pitcher needs more space.<sup>9</sup> CBS withdrew Amos ‘n Andy after the long hot summer of 1965. The

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.amosandy.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Robert Wright, “The Silent Treatment,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2006, p. A 23

compelling argument that the NAACP and other civil rights groups could not make, was made by the inarticulate rioters of Watts.

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

### **The Challenge is political, not legal**

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

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

period, so that blasphemy laws tend to protect the state religion only, such as Anglicanism in England and Lutheranism in Denmark. Europe also has laws against certain forms of bigotry, particularly anti-Semitism. In England, the net is cast a little wider. The Race Relations Act prohibits the use of a language which would incite racial hatred. But it has yet to prohibit the incitement of hatred against groups defined culturally and religiously. Tariq Modood has pointed out that it has not even been 15 years since Britain's Commission on Racial Equality denied that the vilification of Muslims was a form of racism.<sup>10</sup> In France, laws limit or outlaw debates on certain issues. It is a crime to deny the Holocaust. But French law also makes it compulsory for schools to teach that colonialism was beneficial for those who were colonized.

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

An alternative solution was suggested by Ronald Dworkin in the *New York Review of Books*. Dworkin offers a consistent liberal position, that of no censorship, and calls for doing away with any laws that may impinge on free speech, including blasphemy laws or laws that criminalize Holocaust denial. What is striking about the Dworkin piece is its silence about hate speech and bigotry and how to confront it. Ask yourself: what, after all, is the rationale for criminalizing Holocaust Denial? Clearly, not free speech. Rather, it is the more urgent imperative for peaceful coexistence between

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<sup>10</sup> Tariq Modood, "The Liberal Dilemma: Integration or Vilification," See, [www.OpenDemocracy.com](http://www.OpenDemocracy.com) 08.02.2006

Christians and Jews in post-Holocaust Europe. Let us remember that the very notion of a Judeo-Christian civilization is mainly a post-Holocaust political project. Prior to the Holocaust, mainstream politics did not hyphenate Judaism with Christianity, but opposed one to the other.

The fact is that whereas the law can be a corrective on individual discrimination, it has seldom been an effective restraint on hate movements that target vulnerable minorities. If the episode of the Danish cartoons demonstrated one thing, it was that Islamophobia was a growing presence in Europe. One is struck by the ideological diversity of this phenomenon. Just as there was a left wing anti-Semitism in Europe before fascism, contemporary Islamophobia too is articulated in not only the familiar language of the right, but also the less familiar language of the left. The latter language is secular, even feminist. The Danish cartoons and their enthusiastic re-publication throughout Europe, in both right and left-wing papers, was our first public glimpse of left and right Islamophobia marching in step formation. Its political effect has been to explode the middle ground, reminiscent of the blowing up of the Shia shrine in Iraq which triggered the civil war between Shia and Sunni.

My sense is that we are now entering a period where Islamophobia is maturing into an ideology of hate, a grand ideology driven by a core explanation of what is wrong with the world: hence the growing claim that there is a clash of civilizations. The clash of civilizations is, in turn, the ideological arm of the war on terror. This is why it is particularly significant that when the Danish cartoons met with protests, the response was to up the ante from that of defense of free speech to a defense of civilization.

I want to close with the old question: What is to be Done? I suggest a scale of responses, with an accent on more rather than less debate, and a focus more on the political than the legal. The real challenge is intellectual and political.

The intellectual challenge lies in distinguishing between two strands in the history of free speech – blasphemy and bigotry.<sup>11</sup> The political challenge lies in building a local and global coalition against all forms of bigotry. If the local context is the dramatic growth of Muslim minorities in Europe and their struggle for human and citizenship rights, the global context is an equally dramatic turning point in world history. The history of the past five centuries has been one of western domination. Beginning 1491, Western colonialism understood and presented itself to the world at large as a civilizing and a rescue mission, a mission to rescue minorities and to civilize majorities. The colonizing discourse historically focused on barbarities among the colonized – sati, child marriage and polygamy in India, female genital mutilation and slavery in Africa – and presented colonialism as a rescue mission for women, children, and minorities, at the same time claiming to be a larger project to civilize majorities. Meanwhile, Western minorities lived in the colonies with privilege and impunity. Put together, it has been five centuries of an inability to live with difference in the world. The irony is that a growing number of mainstream European politicians, perhaps nostalgic about empire, are experimenting with importing these same time-tested rhetorical techniques into domestic politics: the idea is to compile a list of barbaric cultural practices among immigrant minorities, as a way first to isolate, then to stigmatize, and then to frame them.

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<sup>11</sup> Even though there are important instances where the boundary is blurred, as in the case of responses to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

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

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