

Thinking of Muslims in 'Morally Relevant Ways'¹

Asma Barlas

I would like to thank the Wheeler Center and professor Raimond Gaita for including me in this series. I was motivated to make the long trek here not just by the compelling way in which he has framed it but also by the moral appeal of his conviction that people who are different from us can nonetheless inhabit “with us the space of common understanding.”²

The reason I find his reasoning so attractive is that it is rare in the West’s auto-hagiography, if I can call it that. At least, it is missing from the dominant narratives Westerners have chosen to tell themselves about Islam and Muslims for nearly a millennium and a half.³ It is this absence that is the subject of my talk and, more specifically, some tropes and vocabularies that impede thinking about them in “morally relevant ways.” This is how Richard Rorty defines solidarity which he admits is easier to feel with those whom we consider “one of ‘us’” than with “people wildly different from ourselves.” Even so, he believes it is to our own benefit to be able to include such people “in the range of ‘us.’”⁴

Yet, the West has almost never included Muslims in this range. Indeed, the ideological template within which it continues to confront them rules out such a possibility by treating difference itself as wild and oppositional, reinscribing a long history of Western violence against Muslims as discrete and episodic thus masking its continuities, and reframing many Western transgressions as acts of reverse violence by Muslims thus transforming Westerners into victims. There is simply no space here for the West to develop certain moral vocabularies in relation to Muslims. I say this in light of Rorty’s claim that we construct such vocabularies by locating the “narratives of our own lives... [within]...larger historical narratives.”⁵ If this is so then, clearly, the ways in which the West narrates itself in relation to Islam and Muslims is not only a window into its collective psyche but also consequential for its own moral growth. In quoting Rorty, I don’t mean to signal my agreement with his peculiar view of difference and I will in fact critique it later on. However, his argument about moral vocabularies does serve as a point departure for me to trace the historical genealogies of some persistent anti-Islamic tropes and narratives. I will wait until the end of this exercise in remembering to draw out some of its lessons.

¹ The phrase is Richard Rorty’s (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/>). An earlier version of this paper was published as “Would Spinoza Understand Me? Europe, Islam, and the Mirror of Difference” in Asma Barlas, *Reunderstanding Islam*, Van Gorum Press, 2008.

² Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil*, Routledge, 2004: p. 341.

³ I use the term ‘the West’ as it is typically: as excluding a reference to Muslims living within it.

⁴ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989: p. 192.

⁵ R. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge University Press, 1991: p. 154; p. 163.

Three traveling tropes

In a small but evocative study of Western views of Islam in the Middle Ages, the historian Robert Southern speaks about a “strong desire not to know for fear of contamination” that made “the existence of Islam the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom.”⁶ A millennium later, Islam is once again being depicted as a sweeping problem by a secular West and I believe partly because of the same desire not to know and the same fear of contamination that bedeviled the early Christians. This isn’t to say that the fear and desire have remained constant over time and space, or that the West’s history is unbroken, or that its images of Islam have been impervious to change. It is merely to note certain “tragic continuities” in Western attitudes that belie the “discontinuities and epochal shifts” marked by secularism, humanism, and modernity.⁷ If we tend not to see these, it could be because of a conceit of history, that one can draw “a line between now and then” as a way to be “done with the past.” But, as many current debates on Islam attest, “the past lives and breathes ... right here and now,”⁸ in the repetition of certain medieval Christian tropes about it, the Prophet, and the Qur’an. I will consider each of these in turn.

From Antichrist to antithesis

The oldest is the oppositional positioning of Islam and the West which dates to changing notions of “Christian community” in the mid-ninth century. Tomaz Mastnak notes that these shifts also induced a change in European views of the Arabs, who were the first Muslims they encountered and whom they ultimately came to see as “the enemy.” To earlier generations of Christians, they had been one among “pagan, or infidel, barbarians” who didn’t merit much attention.⁹ For instance, the Battle of Poitiers in 733, depicted by later historians as having “saved Christian Europe from the Muslims,” was to its own contemporaries just “one of many military encounters between Christians and Saracens.”¹⁰ Even the Arab conquest of Spain didn’t make it into a chronicle like Bede’s. It was only when “Western unity” began to express itself as Christendom that Muslims also began to be described as the “normative enemies of Christianity.”¹¹ What I find important in this context isn’t that Christian unity was always fraught but that it emerged around a view of the

⁶ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University, 1962, p. 3.

⁷ I borrow this phrase from Saidya Hartman who uses it for speaking about constructions of blackness in the U.S. *Scenes of Subjection*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 7; p. 5.

⁸ Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History*, University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 13. 16.

⁹ Tomaz Mastnak, *Crusading Peace*, University of California Press, 2002, p. 104; 107; 96.

¹⁰ This myth only became “an indispensable ingredient of European ideology” after the fact; p. 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Saracens as the common enemy. As Pope Urban II declared before the First Crusade, the only form of “warfare that [was] righteous” for Christians was to “brandish your sword against Saracens.” It was, in the words of one Fulcher, time for all “robbers” to become “soldiers of Christ,”¹² a trope that would later on be mapped onto Islam along with the concept of holy war which is missing from the Qur’an itself.¹³

By the high Middle Ages, Christians had come to see in Islam not just “a sinister conspiracy against Christianity...[but] that total negation of [it]...which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist.”¹⁴ According to Southern, this fear grew out of the “ignorance of a confined space” and a reliance on Biblical exegesis to explain Islam. However, since it was the Christians who lived in the “middle of Islam”¹⁵ (Muslim Spain) who embraced this view, it is questionable whether distance from Muslims had anything to do with their ignorance. If anything, as Southern himself argues, different modes of ignorance of Islam replaced one another in succession, persisting for centuries on end.

It is true, however, that from being the Antichrist in early medievalism, Islam went to being just an Antichrist by the early modern period (for instance, in Luther’s work), but even a millennium after its advent, it was being positioned as “directly opposite to the Christian Religion,”¹⁶ by Hugo Grotius, the famous Dutch jurist. Writing at the time of the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Netherlands and the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants he was preoccupied by the schisms among Christians. In fact, he derided them for differing as much from one another as “heathens from Christians” and bearing “so much hatred and ill-will” toward one another as to undercut “the true spirit of charity, which is the bond of peace.”¹⁷ Yet, it is not Christians or Christianity Grotius blames for creating bloodshed but the “Mahometan Religion” which he excoriates as a religion of “robbers.”¹⁸

Growing secularism ushered in some new images of Islam and, for a while, the fashion of using Muslims for European self-critique. However, even in their fleeting role as Europe’s civilised others, Muslims were being positioned as its antithesis and it was still the Europeans who were defining both identities. Then, too, views of Muslims as civilised didn’t end their depictions as barbaric. In spite of its cultural tolerance, secular humanism continued to draw on the idea of “Christian cultural superiority verses Eastern barbarity,” becoming the bridge between “medieval and modern attitudes toward the East and Islam.”¹⁹ If it no longer cast Muslims as “enemies of the faith,” it reconstructed them as

¹² Ibid., p. 52; 51.

¹³ See Asma Barlas, “Jihad=Holy War= Terrorism,” *AJISS*, Winter, 2003 (20:1 pp. 46-62).

¹⁴ Southern, *Western Views*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17; 25.

¹⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Truth of the Christian Religion*, USA: Kessinger Publishing, n.d., p. 235.

¹⁷ Translator’s preface, *ibid.*, p. xx.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁹ Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, University of Pennsylvania, 2004, p. 187; p. 9.

the “new barbarians” who now had to be confronted culturally and politically. Even Erasmus, who “challenged contemporary European notions of holy war and the Infidel” wasn’t “immune to the rhetoric of Turkish barbarism.”²⁰

The trope gradually came to include all Muslims and it continues to underpin some contemporary polemics against Islam such as those by Orianna Fallaci. Significantly, she decried Islam in overtly Biblical terms in books like *The Apocalypse*, in which she denounced Muslim immigration as the latest phase of an assault begun seven centuries ago against Christian Europe with “the brutal incursions of the Ottoman Empire.” At the same time, she also likened Muslims to Nazis and aligned Islamism with Nazism with which, she insisted, “no compromise is possible. No hypocritical tolerance. And those who do not understand this simple reality are feeding the suicide of the West.” Though overblown, her rhetoric conjured up Islam in its historically familiar role of the Antichrist and, even as she savaged Muslims, she cast the Europeans as their victims. It was on this point that even some of her critics came to her defense, praising her for resisting the “penitential narcissism that makes the West guilty of even that which victimises it,”²¹ as a French philosopher put it.

From devil to terrorist

The theme of European victimisation at the hands of Muslims was also re-enacted with the republication of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet as a terrorist. Surprisingly, much of the secular intelligentsia feigned surprise that Muslims would be so insulted by such a depiction that some would respond to it with “real” violence. I say “feigned” because it was precisely this reaction on which many people had banked to confirm their view that Muslims lack a sense of humor and appreciation for tolerance and freedom. The reactions of a few Muslims then became a way to portray not just the cartoonists but the principle of free speech itself as the victim of “Islamic” aggression. Since much has been said on the subject, I will content myself with making just three points.

First, egregious images of the Prophet date from medieval times and have a much older pedigree than does free speech; in effect, such images were never contingent on the idea or practice of freedom. The cartoons are merely the latest in this series of images and need to be looked at within the context of a larger historical narrative than arguments about free speech allow. Although this narrative also includes some salutary images, depictions of the Prophet have generally served as a foil for establishing European piety, innocence, reasonableness, and most recently, victimisation.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.174-175.

²¹ Marget Talbot, “The Agitator,” *The New Yorker*, June 5, 2006. Interestingly, Talbot casts Fallaci as an “agitator” rather than as the Islamophobe that she clearly was.

To medieval Christians, he was the Antichrist, a heathen idol, the devil, Mahound (as also in Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*), and an imposter; he appears in all these guises from the Crusades right up to the Reformation. As we know, his depiction as a religious imposter during this period reached its literary apogee in Dante who consigned him to the eighth circle of hell. Two centuries later, he reappears as an Antichrist in Luther's work who mentions him two dozen times in a single book, "all in the form of demonisation."²²

Another century later, Grotius, whom we met earlier, declared him a thief. In contrast to Jesus who "led an innocent life, against which no objection can be made," he says, the Prophet "was a long time a robber." Not satisfied with this comparison, he goes on to declare all Christians to be innocent. They "who embraced the law of Christ, were men who feared God and led innocent lives," he alleges, but "they who first embraced Mahometanism were robbers, and men void of humanity and piety."²³ Such a view of Christian innocence, which is reflected in the West's tendency towards victimisation, follows Grotius' rebuke in the same volume of Christians for hating one another, as I noted earlier.

By the Enlightenment, critics were assailing the Prophet in the new language of secularism. Voltaire, for instance, decried him as the "worst type of... fanatic" and Kant as "the greatest enemy of reason who ever lived."²⁴ Such "Classically inspired secular images,"²⁵ as we know, have survived into the present and the Danish cartoons illustrate that. They have merely put a contemporary political spin on medieval images of the Prophet so that he now appears as a terrorist rather than as the Antichrist; however, both images are equally aberrant and evoke fear and loathing. This is why framing the "cartoon controversy" as a free speech issue deflects attention from the cartoons' genealogy.

However, even if one wants to talk only about free speech, the reality is that speech allows not only expressions of dissent or critique or humor but also assertions of power. If "the exercise of power is inseparable from its display," then enacting it in some way is "essential to reproducing domination." To take an example from the period of U.S. slavery, "domination depended upon demonstrations of the slave-holder's dominion and the captive's abasement." That is, the "owner's display of mastery was just as important as the legal title to slave property."²⁶ Something similar seems to be at work in the West today where free speech allows some within it to represent and reproduce Western epistemic dominion over Muslims by desecrating their sacred symbols at will. In fact, through speech they are able to achieve what they cannot in real life. Even if this displacement from the physical to the psychic signifies the limits of Western power, the point is that free speech is integral to its display and it is as

²² Minou Reeves, *Muhammad in Europe*, New York University, 2000, p. 102.

²³ Grotius, pp. 239-240.

²⁴ Reeves, p. 150.

²⁵ Bisaha, p. 93.

²⁶ Hartman, p. 7-8.

much this display as the contents of attacks that angers many Muslims.

Lastly, the cartoons aren't funny because terrorism isn't funny and they aren't ironic because most Westerners suspect Muslims of being terrorists; as such, one must ask what their value and function really is. In a different context, Saidya Hartman argues that organizing "innocent amusements and spectacles of mastery" is a way for the dominant classes "to establish their dominion."²⁷ In continuation of what I have just said, the cartoons are very much enactments of mastery. They also reinforce intra-Western solidarity against Muslims produced by images of suffering at the hands of a common enemy since they can only work if most Westerners are willing to claim 9/11/2001²⁸ as their own trauma.

From burning to banning the Qur'an

A final theme I will consider is that of destroying the Qur'an, which surfaces as a desire to burn and to ban it, as the Dutch politician Geert Wilders advocates doing. An early instance of burning the Qur'an occurs in the sixteenth century play, *Tamburlaine*. Written by Christopher Marlowe at a time of the "Turkish threat," it celebrates the Mongol defeat of the Turks and, in it, the hero "orders his soldiers to burn the Qur'an before his eyes as a token of his great victory."²⁹ Wilders is no Tamburlaine, of course; he doesn't lead a victorious army and, in the end, he couldn't even destroy the "fascist" Qur'an, as he calls it, on film, a fact that signals for many Europeans their emasculation at the hands of Muslims. However, his desire to get rid of it isn't any different from the one Marlowe projected onto Tamburlaine. And, much as fears of the "Turkish threat" were the backdrop for Marlowe's play, secular fears of the "Muslim threat" are the backdrop for Wilders' diatribes against Islam.

Another instance of Dutch intellectuals vilifying the Qur'an on film occurred in *Submission*, in which lines from it were scrawled on Muslim women's semi-naked bodies as a way to prove that it sanctions their abuse. Although some Muslims also believe this to be true, as Talal Asad argues, the Qur'an "does not need" to justify violence. Some people may appeal to scriptural authority because it seems "just—or else expedient. But that's very different from saying that they are constrained to do so."³⁰ Moreover, reading sexual oppression into the Qur'an does little to advance the cause of Muslim women's liberation, to which the filmmakers, van Gogh and Hirsi Ali, claimed to be committed. In this context, Ali's view that such provocations are meant to enable Muslim self-

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ I qualify 9/11 because, as Ariel Dorfman so movingly reminded us, the U.S. carried out its own 9/11 in Chile in 1973. <http://www.duke.edu/web/forums/dorfman.html>

²⁹ Reeves, *ibid.*, p. 113. In reality, Tamburlaine was a Buddhist as she points out.

³⁰ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 11; 10. His emphasis.

critique and cross-cultural dialogue³¹ is disingenuous. For observant Muslims, seeing the Qur'an desecrated can never be the conduit for self-critique, or, for that matter for liberation. Then, too, there can be no dialogue between two groups if only the values of one are allowed to structure the conversation.

In ending, I want to note the media's sensationalist references to van Gogh's murder by a Dutch Muslim as a "ritual slaughter" and a "home grown jihad"³² which showed that "traditional values have been eroded in a country roiled by a rise in Muslim extremism."³³ A murder is not a jihad, either in the Qur'an or in the eyes of most Muslims, and to regard one murder, no matter how heinous, as evidence of impending doom is not just hyperbolic but also duplicitous given the nature and scale of violence that the West has done to itself and to others. That such distortions fail to evoke much outrage testifies to the extent to which anti-Muslim prejudice has been normalised in the West and to the partiality of those Westerners who, while pressing Muslims for self-critique, remain silent about such glaring public displays of anti-Islamic bigotry.

Repetition/Repression and other questions

Since my own talk has also been partial I should clarify that its intent wasn't to deny that Muslims have done, and continue to do, violence or that Islam sanctions certain kinds of violence. Rather, it was to demonstrate that this truth masks other equally compelling truths and it silences the very histories and theologies on which it draws to assert itself. In reciting some of these histories I wanted to try and apportion the burden of violence more fairly, in that collectively, by assigning the West's share to it. I also wanted to focus on the ideological imprint of medieval Biblical exegesis on secular sensibilities, as evidenced in the continuing depiction of Islam as the Antichrist.

What the eternal return of this pejorative image reveals is that the West can only live its experiences of Islam "in the mode of repetition."³⁴ Why this is so requires a different talk as does sorting through different theories of repetition. Still, I should note that, for Freud, repetition signaled the return of a repressed trauma, and trauma, says Cathy Caruth, "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available." The "story of trauma" therefore attests to "its endless impact on a life." More to the point, what makes something traumatic is not "the simple violent or original event in an individual's past," but "its very unassimilated nature—the way in which it was precisely not known in the first instance." It is the not knowing that "returns to haunt the survivor." While this

³¹ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, "Fitna Is an Embarrassment for the Dutch Cabinet," *De Volkskrant* (The Netherlands), March 28, 2008.

³² CBS, *60 Minutes*, "Slaughter and 'Submission,'" August 20, 2006.

³³ Mike Corder, "The Netherlands not so Dutch Anymore," *AP*, November 22, 2006.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Columbia University, 1994, p. 18.

involves some self-harm it also opens up the possibility for a person “to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.”³⁵

That their encounters with Islam and Muslims have turned out to be a lasting trauma for many Westerners seems clear enough but what precisely they have been unable to grasp or to assimilate after nearly fourteen centuries, or which wounds cry out for redress, or what sorts of self-correction or mastery they yearn to achieve through this repetition-repression cycle I can't say. What I do know is that this cycle forecloses feeling any solidarity with Muslims, at least at a collective level. (I realise that there is plenty of goodwill for Muslims in the West, but it tends to be localised to individual relationships.)

Here, I want to say something about the West's approach to difference as it has manifested itself historically towards Muslims. As my brief review illustrates, it experiences difference not as a rich or enriching diversity, but as antithesis, mimicry, and parody. Even Rorty thinks of it as “wild” which is why he can call its erasure solidarity: “including others in the range of ‘us.’” In a Rortian universe, then, solidarity means assimilating the other and one must wonder if, in the end, an other will remain whom one will need to think of in moral terms. It seems to me that the only way to avoid such a paradox is to start by thinking about difference differently. For instance, Professor Gaita's view that people can potentially inhabit “the space of common understanding” implies that what is at issue isn't the identity of the self or the other. Rather, it is a willingness to be “unselfing” and responsive to the “disciplined individuality of the Other.”³⁶ In effect, what seems primary in his conception isn't a fixed view of difference but the relational nature of encounters that can also remake the self (make it different from itself) as a result of its engagement with the Other.

I should also note that the Qur'an doesn't present difference as threatening or as inequality or hierarchy. Rather, it teaches that God created us from a single self and made us “into nations and tribes, so that [we] might come to know one another.”³⁷ Thus, differences exist by God's will and their purpose is to enable both self-awareness and mutual recognition; in fact, one is the condition for the other. These two ways of thinking about difference avoid the contradictions inherent in many liberal discourses. However, having said this, I suspect another view of difference alone cannot yield a moral view of Muslims.

Writing about the possibility of the U.S. making reparations to Native Americans, David Williams argues that it will depend on whether it can let go of its own “yearning for moral purity” and accept “the moral cloudiness of its past.” It is not possible, he says, to “rewind the camera and play the story forward again...to begin anew, morally fresh;” there will always be a “moral remainder.” Hence, what is needed is opening oneself to guilt: not a self-

³⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, Johns Hopkins, 1996, p. 4, 7. 62

³⁶ Gaita, *Ibid.*, 2004.

³⁷ In A. Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an, NY: Tehrike Tarsile Qur'an*, 1988, p. 794.

indulgent or destructive guilt or the kind from which “everyone gets to feel washed clean,” but the sort that makes people realise that “We tasted guilt, and it did not poison us. It merely opened our eyes.”³⁸ This argument could easily be extended to the West, but I fear it gestures to a very tangled reality and it leaves out the calculus of power. Arguably, it is the moral cloudiness of its past that also explains the West’s yearning for purity and yet this longing keeps it from admitting its crimes against not just native peoples but also African-Americans and countless others, including Muslims and its internal others. But without admitting culpability, the West cannot taste the kind of guilt of which Williams speaks. Then, too, the hubris and moral corrosion resulting from centuries of exerting unbridled power are un-likely to be tempered by the moral constraints of a guilt that only they can feel who see themselves as just one among many of this earth’s inhabitants. To be self-aggrandising and all-powerful is already to be beyond opening one’s eyes.

³⁸ D. Williams, “In Praise of Guilt,” in Lenzeini, Federico (ed.), *Reparations for Indigenous People*, Oxford University Press, 2008: pp. 248-49.