

INTRODUCTION



On the Muslim Question: Philosophy, Politics, and the Western Street

The Jewish question was fundamental for politics and philosophy in the Enlightenment. In our time, as the Enlightenment fades, the Muslim question has taken its place.

The emancipation of the Jews was central to Enlightenment philosophy and politics. Enlightened statesmen endeavored to change the laws that had relegated Jews to second-class citizenship, and to end the pogroms that had filled Europe with terror. The freedom of Jews to vote, to participate in politics as equals, and to walk through their cities as equals accompanied the expansion of democracy and marked the achievement of liberal constitutions. As the West became more enlightened, more liberal, more democratic, it left behind the laws and customs that had required discrimination against Jews.

So it was in philosophy. Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question" saw the Jew as the site where post-Enlightenment Europe confronted the specter of theology in citizenship. The Jewish question enfolded questions of citizenship, religion, difference and belonging, integration

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and the preservation of culture. Jewish emancipation was evidence of both the achievements and the limits of liberal institutions. Long before Marx, Spinoza's political theology made the Jewish question central to determining the place of religion in the state, and to the achievement of enlightenment in politics. Hegel's political theology constructed Abraham as the father of individuality. Whether they praised or blamed liberalism, whether they sought to advance or to forestall democracy, Western philosophers saw the Jewish question as the axis on which these struggles turned. Modern struggles over faith and secularism, progress and loss, alienation and community, equality and difference were fought out on the terrain of the Jewish question. Late modern philosophy has the Holocaust at its heart.¹

The preoccupations of philosophy fade against the harshness of the problems of politics. There was, in the shadow of the Enlightenment, a second Jewish question bound with the first. As politics and philosophy worked in the world, the question of the place of Jews and the practices of antisemitism presented wrongs to be righted, challenges to the promise and ambitions of the Enlightenment. It was characteristic of the Jewish question in its practical and historical form that Jews were marked out as a political threat even as they were subject to political assaults; marked as evil even as conduct toward them testified to the failure of the ethical systems that had abandoned them. The Jewish question marked the great failures as well as the great achievements of the Enlightenment.

In our time, the figure of the Muslim has become the axis where questions of political philosophy and political theology, politics and ethics meet. Islam is marked as the

preeminent danger to politics; to Christians, Jews, and secular humanists; to women, sex, and sexuality; to the values and institutions of the Enlightenment. In relation to Muslims and Islam, liberty, equality, and fraternity become not imperatives but questions: Liberty? Equality? Fraternity? They are asked of Muslims and Islam. They are asked of us all.

The liberal and social democratic states of our time hesitate before Muslims: hesitate to include them, hesitate to extend them the rights and privileges of citizenship. Though we maintain our belief that law is neutral, that the Constitution secures rights, and that America has true freedom of religion, American citizenship has not protected America's Muslim citizens from surveillance, detention, unlawful searches, and the assaults of discrimination. The American confrontation with the Muslim question has exposed non-Muslim Americans to the same threats of discrimination, surveillance, detention, and imprisonment when they act as allies.

Europe has furnished no stronger, surer protection of rights. France's severe republican secularism, *laïcité*, has not produced the promised neutrality of the public sphere. The same places that once heard calls for the expulsion of the Jews now hear demands for an end to Muslim immigration. France burns in the riots of its Muslim suburbs, the *banlieues d'Islam*. French society is torn by controversies over the veil. Norwegian children are massacred by a man who sees himself as the champion of Europe against Islam. Partisan politics in the Netherlands and Denmark centers on the Muslim question. In Germany and the United Kingdom, the prime ministers orate against multiculturalism and the hazards of extremist Islam. The conditions (formal and informal)

set for the inclusion of Turkey in the European Union provide an institutional and juridical map of European anxieties: the status of women, the place of religion and the family, the permissibility of ethnic identification, the use and limits of state violence.

The concerns the West directs at Muslims map sites of domestic anxiety. European states—indeed all the states of the liberal and social democratic West—are faced with continuing questions about the status of women, sexuality, equality and difference, faith and secularism. They are fueled by anxieties over the meaning of the past and the direction of the future. The European constitutional crisis is impelled in part by an uncertainty over the status of Christianity in the constitution of Europe. Here, the question is not the inclusion or exclusion of Turkey, a nation predominately Muslim in culture and faith, but the identity of the receiving nations. Europe is asked if it is Christian or secular, and cannot find an answer.

In America, the Muslim question takes a different form. Analysts of American politics from Alexis de Tocqueville to Louis Hartz have observed that America is a liberal nation, born in, from, and to the Enlightenment. American Christians and American secularists alike were able to give the same answer to the Jewish question, the answer of inclusion that turned on partial and reciprocal assimilation. As Jews became American, Americans became more Jewish.

America confronts the Muslim question without the imperative to acceptance. The figure of the Muslim does not bridge the divide between the Christian and the secular, or provide a model for the chosen. For Americans, who see themselves in the place of Isaac and Jacob, as people of the covenant, wrestling with the angel, the

figure of the Muslim raises the problem of Ishmael and Esau, of those in the desert, outside the covenant.

The West as a whole is confronted by changes in the practices and understanding of sovereignty, and by challenges to those liberal and neoliberal institutions that have thus far held a potentially rebellious democracy in check. As it was with the Jewish question, so it is with the Muslim question: in the most fundamental sense, what is at stake is the value of Western civilization. The figure of the Muslim stands like a sentinel marking the limits of the West: the state system, human rights, civil freedoms, democracy, sovereignty, even the simple requirements of bare life.

States and Rights

The Muslim question, like the Jewish question before it, is connected to fears for national and international security. In the nineteenth century, the Jewish anarchist was the feared agent of global terrorism, using the weapons of terror, operating across state lines, acknowledging no state. Now it is the Muslim terrorist who presents a threat not only to the security of states, but to the security of the state system. In each case, the Muslim and the Jew are marked as both before and after the state in time. They are tribal, never having achieved the state, a state that Hegel marked as essential to the fullness of civilization. They are after the state, which is to say they are the rootless cosmopolites of a post-Westphalian order. They are said to be after the state in a second, more ordinary sense: pursuing it, opposing it, seeking its end.

The figure of the Muslim also marks the limit of rights. Political philosophers and popular discourse alike, in Europe and the United States, have cast the Muslim as the

exemplary case for the violation of human rights. Muslim practice, indeed, Islam itself, is said to pose special challenges to rights. In the controversies surrounding Salman Rushdie, Theo van Gogh, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and the cartoons published first in the Danish press and later around the world, Muslims are portrayed as presenting special challenges to the exercise of freedom of speech. In the debates over the veil, polygamy, and other issues, Muslims are said to be peculiarly hostile to women. As the West begins, uneasily, to accept a wider range of sexual orientations, Muslims are said to be particularly hostile to gay equality. All the dearest rights—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, equality, even the pursuit of happiness—are said to be endangered by Islam.

Sex and Sexuality

A plethora of Western philosophers and theorists, from all corners of the academy, from the old Left to neoconservatives, have joined in an uneasy alliance to condemn Muslims for the oppression of women. Susan Okin, Jean Elshtain, Elisabeth Badinter, Caroline Fourest, and Oriana Fallacci (among many others) have argued that the veil, female circumcision, polygamy, and arranged marriage present special, perhaps insurmountable, challenges to the human rights of women in Muslim cultures. They argue that Europe and America offer a refuge for Muslim women who must leave their own cultures to find their voices and themselves. For these very curious bedfellows, Islam is a religion hostile to women, a dangerous zone of hypermasculinity.

The construction of the Muslim world as hypermasculine accomplishes several useful objects for the West in general and the United States in particular. Attention to

the plight of women in the Muslim world turns the gaze of potential critics away from the continuing inequality of women in the West. The rights of women become the justification for military adventures and foreign occupation. No woman in her right mind could defend veiling or polygamy, we are told; thus any woman who does so must be deluded or compelled. Protests from the women who are promised liberation are thus read as signs of their oppression, more evidence that intervention is called for. This logic permits no appeal, least of all from those it silences.

Secularism

Slavoj Žižek, citing the debates over the preamble to the European constitution, made the case for atheism as the apex of the Enlightenment. “Where,” he asked, “was modern Europe’s most precious legacy, that of atheism? What makes modern Europe unique is that it is the first and only civilization in which atheism is a fully legitimate option.” Žižek’s endorsement of the Enlightenment exclusion of religion is, however, haunted (like the Enlightenment itself) by the return of the repressed. The proof that “atheism is a European legacy worth fighting for” is that it “creates a safe public space for believers,” even Muslims.² Žižek identifies Muslims as the proper object of tolerance—a disposition he once subjected to a more searching critique.

Marking Muslims as the target of tolerance marks them as other, and as undesirable. Tolerance is not required toward that which is ordinary, familiar; or toward that which is welcome, desirable or good. The object of tolerance is marked as alien and undesirable. W.E.B. Du

Bois once famously asked of African Americans “How does it feel to be a problem?” The same question can be asked of Muslims—on a global scale. Žižek’s formula suggests, however, that more is at stake here than tolerance of Islam. If atheism is one of the triumphs of modernity, then it is not only Islam that is to be tolerated and dismissed, but Christianity.

For many secular philosophers and journalistic literati—Christopher Hitchens, for example—the problem of Islam is the problem of religion writ large. The problem with Muslims is that they are more religious, that their religion dominates their lives, that it cannot be fenced out or fenced in. Many Christians would say the same, proudly, of themselves. They deplore the fencing-out and fencing-in of faith. This might seem to impel an alliance between Judeo-Christian conservatives and Muslims. There have been two obstacles to this. More religious Christians and Jews have been slow to form alliances across religious lines. More importantly, Muslims, like Christians and Jews, are often secular. They share with other secularists a suspicion of religious power. They are in a position to see, with special clarity, the limits and fragility of secularism in the West.

Western secularism is said to have its origins in the separation of church and state. Yet, in many places, the West has not achieved that separation. Blasphemy laws remain. Established churches linger. Secularism is said to create and preserve a neutral public sphere, yet throughout the West the pattern of days and holidays preserves a more Christian past. Christianity dominates the eye and the ear in the sight of cathedrals and the sound of church bells. Ideas of state and sovereignty are informed by a very political theology.

Yet if secularism did not succeed in the vaunted separation of church and state, its partial successes are greater than we acknowledge. The secular settlement ensured that religion would be largely immune from the critiques of philosophers. The rebellious and the skeptical were permitted to leave the churches and live untroubled by them—and the churches in their turn could live untroubled by the skeptical. Churches enjoyed immunity from the critiques of reason. They were sheltered from the rough debates of the public square. Skeptics and philosophers held their tongues, or kept their strictures outside the churches, away from the tender ears of the faithful. This was not the triumph of atheism or enlightenment; this was a settlement between old enemies, each unable to defeat the other, each eager to secure a space free from the other's attacks. Once the presence of the Jews served as an uneasy reminder that things might be otherwise. Now it is the presence of Islam that puts the secular settlement in question.

Secularists who fear Islam fear not only Islam, but the return of religious power. The most honest of these acknowledge, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali has, that they oppose religion in all its forms. Christians may fear another rival in the sphere of religion, Jews a challenge to Zionism. The more knowing and cautious may recognize that the refusal of many secularists to give Islam immunity from question might lead to a new willingness to critique Christianity and Judaism as well.

Philosophers and other academics have their own vulnerabilities to reckon with. The writings of al Farabi, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Khaldun, and other Muslim philosophers are placed outside the canon, exiled scholastically to the provinces of area studies, religious

studies, and anthropology. The Western canon of political philosophy is distorted by genealogies that excise Muslim writings and Muslim philosophers. Many years ago, Leo Strauss argued that Western philosophy had maimed itself in its willful forgetting of Islam and Judaism. Strauss wrote with reproachful disdain of Western philosophy's resistance to the Jewish and Muslim philosophy of the Middle Ages. He taught his students the interpretive strategies of the Jewish *shul* and the Muslim *madrassa*, and broached the possibility of a radically different resolution of the relation of politics, philosophy, and theology.³ Strauss argued for the restoration of Jewish and Muslim philosophy to the canon, most notably in the figures of Maimonides and al Farabi. Strauss's call was all too rare and went unheeded. Only in recent years have theorists and philosophers begun to see their genealogies in a larger and more capacious canon.

Democracy

Near the end of his life, the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida called Islam "the other of democracy."⁴ Derrida sealed off "Greco-Christian and globalatinizing" traditions from the Islamic sources with which they were bound, on which they fed, and in which they found shelter in hard times. He linked Islam to fascism and Muslims to excessive procreation, while identifying French *laïcité* with the liberty, equality, and fraternity in which it is (for its Muslim citizens) notably deficient. In these respects, Derrida's construction of the Muslim as the other of democracy would seem to be merely a commonplace, if distressing, instance of the failure of intellect before

chauvinism. There is, however, something both correct and profound in Derrida's reading.

Muslims have indeed been shown to be democracy's others. They lack democracy, and it must be supplied to them, albeit by undemocratic means. The advancement of liberal democratic institutions in the political realms inhabited by Muslims, like neoliberal institutions in their economic realms, is sought within a regime of conditionality. Democracy, like economic development, can be aided only under certain conditions. The objects of efforts to "democratize" the Middle East are required not merely to win the consent and satisfy the demands of their own electoral constituencies; they must conform to the will of the European Union and the United States. The elected government of Palestine must recognize Israel, whatever its constituents may say; the elected government of Iraq must forgo its choice of prime minister.

The Muslim question spans continents. It unites politicians, philosophers, the press, pundits, and talk-radio ranters in a common anxiety over the clash of civilizations. Yet there is, in these democracies, a popular response that speaks against this. On the streets of the West ordinary people—Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, pagan, atheist, and the rest—are crafting a common life together. These places are the Andalusias of our time, the ornaments of our world. They are hidden in the everyday. We will arrive at those places soon enough, only to find that we are already at home there. But first, let us hear and answer those who argue for the "clash of civilizations," those who fear Islam and take Muslims as the enemy.