

Blasphemy Is Good for You

Katha Pollitt | September 26, 2012 - Published on *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>)

As I write, mobs all over the world are rioting about an amateurish video portraying Muhammad as a horny buffoon. Death toll so far: at least thirty, including Christopher Stevens, US ambassador to Libya, and three embassy staffers. Not to be outdone, Pakistan's railways minister announced he would pay \$100,000 to anyone who murdered the videomaker, and added, "I call upon these countries and say: Yes, freedom of expression is there, but you should make laws regarding people insulting our Prophet. And if you don't, then the future will be extremely dangerous." More riots, embassy closings and a possible assassination attempt or two followed the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo's* retaliatory publication of cartoons of Muhammad naked. To bring it all full circle, an Iranian foundation has raised to \$3.3 million the reward it's offering for the murder of Salman Rushdie. (Just out and highly recommended: *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie's humane and heroic memoir of his years in hiding.)

Shocking as these events were, some reactions here at home were not helpful: *Newsweek's* notorious "Muslim Rage" cover, for example, with its photo of crazed-looking zealots. All together now: there are 1.6 billion Muslims, only a tiny minority of whom are involved in this nonsense. Would *Newsweek* present a story about opposition to gay marriage with a photo of the Westboro Baptist "God Hates Fags" church and the headline "Christian Rage"? Even worse are the posters that went up on September 24 in ten New York City subway stations, the thoughtful offering of birther blogger Pam Geller and her American Freedom Defense Initiative: "In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad." (The ads also appeared in August and September on public buses in San Francisco.)

What about acknowledging and honoring the huge demonstrations by Libyans against the militias who are believed to have killed Stevens? And let's not forget the Muslims who took over *Newsweek's* hashtag: "Twitter is over capacity. Heading to the U.S. embassy. #MuslimRage." "I won a lifetime supply of bacon #MuslimRage." The Muslim response to the subway ads was also classy: "If you see something (stupid), say something (smart) #MySubwayAd." "Hatred is the first savagery. Being a wanker is the first freedom #MySubwayAd."

What if the right to be a wanker—a jerk, an annoying obsessive—is indeed where freedom begins? On WNYC's *The Takeaway*, John Hockenberry had a confusing exchange with BBC chief Jeremy Bowen:

Hockenberry: I'm wondering if it's possible for the United Nations to create an initiative that would talk about some sort of global convention on blasphemy, that would create a cooperative enterprise to control these kinds of incidents, not to interfere into anybody's free speech rights but to basically recognize that there is a global interest in keeping people from going off the rails over a perceived sense of slight by enforcing a convention of human rights, only in this particular case it would be anti-blasphemy?

Bowen: It would be a great idea if they could make it work, but of course you know, you think that the United Nations struggled for ages, and I don't think it's yet succeeded in coming up with a definition of "terrorism." So, in the end, how do you define "blasphemy"?

So the only thing preventing some sort of international convention against "blasphemy" is that people can't agree about what it is? Perhaps the UN could ask Vladimir Putin, who was eager to send three members of Pussy Riot to prison for appearing at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior to perform an anti-Putin "punk prayer" to the Virgin Mary. Their crime: "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." The rise of the Russian Orthodox church in the former Soviet Union, and its connections to a corrupt authoritarian regime, shows that Islam has no monopoly on religious freakouts or their exploitation for political purposes. But you already knew that, having lived through mosque burnings in several states, and of course the extraordinary ongoing wave of arsons, bombings, assaults, stalkings and murders committed against abortion clinics, their doctors and staffs, almost all by deeply devout Catholics and evangelicals.

Sorry, John and Jeremy, there is just no way to "control these kinds of incidents" without suppressing free speech, because the very concept of "blasphemy" entails powerful clerics deciding what a religion "really" says, and what questions about that are legitimate. And why shouldn't religion be fair game for rude remarks, mockery and humor, to say nothing of bold challenges and open expressions of disbelief? Ethnic attacks like Geller's ad are disgusting—calling Muslims savages is like calling Jews subhuman—but I'd say on the whole "blasphemy" has been a force for good in human history. It is part of the process by which millions of people have come to reject theocracy and think for themselves.

When it comes to ideas—and religions are, among other things, ideas—there is no right not to be offended. (There's no right not to be offended by speech where the issue is not religious, either, which is why it's appalling that a British judge convicted 19-year-old Azhar Ahmed of "grossly offensive communication" for writing "all soldiers should die and go to hell" on his Facebook page after six UK troops were killed in Afghanistan.) In fact, if you need laws—and riots and prison and payments for murders—to protect your faith, maybe your faith is weak. Maybe, in your heart of hearts, you suspect that Muhammad was a flawed human being like the rest of us, the Virgin Mary was not all that much of a virgin and God is not so great after all.

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