

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND THE STATE IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

(And the sensibilities of Muslims regarding blasphemy)

Annunziata Carnevale

Introduction

Oriental and Occidental ideologies, and English and Islamic cultures are the main object of this case of study. The problem goes around two main points: the relationship between theology and the state in Islamic countries and the sensibilities of Muslims regarding blasphemy. In fact it is well known how much Islamic countries defend their religion and how much important is for them. Religion for Islamic countries represents the key of their culture is reflected in each of the “Five Pillars of Islam”. When we talk about their religion, we have to be careful on what we say, because they can feel offended or even consider what we said as a blasphemy. “Thus when someone insults the prophet Mohammed, he hasn’t just insulted a historical figure or a religious philosophy. He has collectively insulted an entire people, everything about them”. Gregg Easterbook (1989). Then I am going to analyse Americans sensibility regarding freedom of speech, compare both cultures and explain the consequences of a possible publication.

Description

Salman Rushdie, a self-described “hybrid creature”, was born in Bombay but he grew up in England, he received “occidental” education. He is a writer and in 1988 published *The Satanic Verses*. This novel brought him many problems and created a lot of critiques and discussions. This because his novel was considered blasphemous through the Islamic Prophet. For Muslim critics he had profaned the Islamic faith publishing his novel. In January 1989, an angry crowd in Bradford, England, publicly burned a copy of the book. On February, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran’s spiritual leader, called for the execution of Rushdie for his blasphemy against Islam, the Prophet, and the Holy Koran. Sequestered under the protection of Scotland Yard, Rushdie wrote a statement to ask for apologizes but the Ayatollah responded to his statement saying that anyway he

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would go to the hell. Meanwhile, bomb threats caused several booksellers, to remove the offending text from their shelves in an effort to protect the well-being of their employees.

Viewing this as an assault on freedom of speech, American writers' groups issued statements in support of Rushdie. Twelve members of the European Community received economic and political sanctions because of pulling their envoys from Iran in response to Khomeini's death sentence. The foreign ministers of the forty-six-member Organization of Islamic Conference condemned the book. Meanwhile, the book was scheduled to be translated into twenty languages. In June, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini died, although his condemnation of Rushdie was reiterated. In January of 1990, the Muslims in Great Britain reaffirmed their commitment to pursue Rushdie unless the book was withdrawn.

Regarding publication of the paperback edition, Rushdie offered several reasons in support of its publication, to make the book available for study at colleges, and to maintain the principle that the book is innocent and wrongly accused. He affirmed in an interview on the Newsweek that he knew exactly what he was doing and added: "I must have known what would happen; therefore I did it on purpose, to profit by the notoriety that would result."

Cultural dimensions

Muslims are in the "ethnocentric stage" Milton J. Bennett (1993), they are on "Defense against cultural difference, the state in which one's own culture is experienced as the only viable one the most "evolved" form of civilization, or at least the only good way to live" they think that "The world is organized into "us and them[...]" Milton J. Bennett (2004). They actually think that Rushdie attacked all Islam as the leader of the Islamic Center in Washington affirms: "Rushdie has

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renounced Islam and has insulted and lampooned the person of the prophet; both carry the death penalty” Mohammed Al-Asi (1989).

While Americans pass through two different stages the “ethnocentric stage” Milton J. Bennett (1993) in which they defend their culture they accuse Muslims of censorship “I am fiercely opposed to both censorship and murder. But I almost hesitate to issue that denial, because it obscures what I think is the real issue, which is the long-standing essential inability of East and West to understand each other.” Taghi Modarresi (1989). Moreover, they feel directly attacked “Any attack on you is directed at us all. Censorship in literature is the enemy of literature and death threats, addressed for whatever reason, if they succeed in silencing the author, would mean not only the end of literature but the end of civilization.” Elie Wiesel (1989).

Then they step into the “ethnorelative stage” Milton J. Bennett (1993); in *Adaptation* “the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behaviour appropriate to that culture” Milton J. Bennett (2004); where they defend freedom of speech but at the same time they show their open-mindedness when they analyse facts. “The academic community in America not only must defend intellectual freedom for Mr. Rushdie, but also must demonstrate the courage and the intellectual openness required to examine and understand why Ayatollah Khomeini’s actions struck a responsive chord in millions of fellow humans in a globe we all share” John O. Voll (1989). They defend the right of intellectual freedom, and they are against stereotypes “People should not equate the actions of Khomeini with the actions of the rest of the Islamic world” Jon Mandaville (1989).

Comparing cultures

“Determining the basic dimensions of characteristics of different cultures is the first step in being able to understand the relationships between them.” Peter G. Northouse (2012). “Organizational

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cultures could be classified effectively into two dimensions: egalitarian versus hierarchical and person versus task orientation. The egalitarian-hierarchical dimension refers to the degree to which cultures exhibit shared power as opposed to hierarchical power. Person-task orientation refers to the extent to which cultures emphasize human interaction as opposed to focusing on task accomplish.” Trompenaars (1994). We can state that we are analysing two opposite types of cultures: American culture, which is an *individualistic* culture, and Muslim culture, which is *collectivistic*” Hall (1976). Each of this culture is part of two bigger cultures the Western culture and the Islamic culture. Western culture is an egalitarian culture, while when Islamic culture is a hierarchical culture. More in detail, both cultures may have different *cultural dimensions* GLOBE researchers (1991), for example *power distance* or *assertiveness*, *gender-egalitarianism* that is completely absent in Islamic culture. It is clear that these cultures are different, so to solve the situation it could be useful to find a compromise using *cross-cultural* communication “that allow decisions to be implemented by members of diverse cultures”. Mansour Javidan and Robert J. House (2001). However, it seems to be complicated in this cross-cultural situation.

Consequences

The matter is whether or not it has to be printed and distributed a paperback version of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*; because this decision could be harmful to the safety of the employees because they could be attacked by Muslims. “It is regrettable that foreign government has been able to hold hostage our most scared First Amendment principle. Nevertheless, the safety of our employees and patrons must take precedence” Leonard Riggio (1989). The Director General of the Islamic Cultural Center found that: “The book is really very, very offensive”. Ali Mugram al-Ghamdi (1989). This kind of book could profit a lot of money, because a lot of people would buy it, obviously non-Muslim people just to have fun or to see the reality from another point of view.

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Probably, the publication would generate many conflicts, as it happened with the publication of the French satiric journal Charlie Hebdo. It would increase the conflicts between nations and in that case, history will be repeated.

Conclusion

The point of the problem is to understand the importance of values in each culture, in this case religious values, to know the limits of our freedom of speech and action because “Every culture has its sacred objects, and in the United States, the flag is likely to be one. A current example is the furor in Chicago over an art display that includes an American flag placed on the floor where viewers may step on it. War veterans are picketing... politicians are threatening a boycott... a woman has been arrested. The protests should help Americans understand the outrage in the Islamic world over Salman Rushdie’s novel” Oregonian (1989).

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