Is Critique Secular?
Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech

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Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism

FOR MANY YEARS NOW, there has been much talk in Euro-America about the threat to free speech, particularly whenever its Muslims have raised the issue of blasphemy in response to some public criticism of Islam. The most recent crisis was the scandal of the Danish cartoons.[1] A decade and a half after the Rushdie affair, the old religious denunciation of "blasphemy" had reared its head again among Muslims in Europe and beyond, seeking to undermine hard-won secular freedoms. Or so we were told. There were angry protests and some violence on one side, many affirmations of principle and expressions of outrage on the other.[2] The affair was discussed largely in the context of the problem of integrating Muslim immigrants into European society and how it related to the "global menace" of Islamists.[3] Coming after the attack on the World Trade Center and the London bombings, the cartoon scandal was linked to a wider discourse: the West's "War on Terror," a conflict that many see as part of an intrinsic hostility between two civilizations, Islam and Europe. Thus the Danish press and many Danish politicians began to criticize Islamic studies scholars of Islam for disregarding this fundamental antagonism. It was argued that these scholars had intentionally avoided certain civi-

lizational topics, such as the ways in which Islam is not only an obstacle to integration but a potential security threat.[4]

The attitudes displayed in the cartoon affair by Muslims and non-Muslims were quite remarkable. However, this essay is neither an apologia for, nor a criticism of, those attitudes; it is an attempt to think about the place of blasphemy—a religious concept—in secular liberal society. In what follows I want to think about blasphemy from various angles and treat it as the crystallization of some moral and political problems in liberal Europe. So I will have less to say about traditions of Islamic thought and behavior than about the modern secular condition we all inhabit.

Blasphemy as a Sign of Civilizational Identity

The conflict that many Euro-Americans saw in the Danish cartoons scandal was between the West and Islam, each championing opposing values: democracy, secularism, liberty, and reason on one side, and on the other the many opposites—tyranny, religion, authority, and violence. The idea of blasphemy clearly belongs to the latter series and is seen by secularists as a constraint on the freedom of speech—on freedom itself—guaranteed by democratic principles and by the pursuit of reason so central to Western culture. Pope Benedict's Regensburg lecture in 2006 emphasized the idea of a civilizational confrontation between *Christianity*, which reconciles Greek reason with biblical faith, and *Islam*, which encourages violent conversion because it has no faith in reason.[5]

Free speech, it is said, is central to democracy. Consistent with the standpoint of Pope Benedict and many of the defenders of the Danish cartoons, it is often claimed that democracy is rooted in Christianity and is therefore alien to Islam. There is a widespread conviction that Christian doctrine has been receptive to democracy because in Christendom (unlike Islam) church and state began as separate entities. The notion of historical origins is more problematic than is popularly supposed: when did Christianity

begin? Or Islam? It must not be forgotten that the Byzantine state-church was the space in which central Christian doctrines were formulated and fought over, that even in the Middle Ages and well beyond, the separation between religious and political authority was far from complete, and that political inequality was generally regarded as legitimate. This is not to say that all those who sought to maintain inequality were Christian and that their opponents were always non-Christian. As all historians of the subject know, the struggle for equal rights was ideologically and socially complicated.

Many Euro-Americans, including, most recently, Francis Fukuyama, have traced "democracy" through "political equality" to the Christian doctrine of "the universal dignity of man," in order to make the claim that it is a unique value of Western civilization.[6] In Medieval Latin, however, *dignitas* was used to refer to the privilege and distinction of high office, not to the equality of all human beings. Christianity does have a notion of universal spiritual worth (as, for that matter, does Islam), but that has been compatible with great social and political inequality. In the nineteenth century some writers (for example, the very influential George Grote) began to trace the concept and practice of modern democracy not from Christianity but from classical Greece.[7] Pre-Christian Athens certainly had a concept of equal, albeit restricted, citizenship and rudimentary democratic practices, which included the right to speak freely in the political forum, but it had no notion of "the universal dignity of man." In European Christendom it was only gradually, through continuous conflict, that many inequalities were eliminated and that secular authority replaced one that was ecclesiastical.

There is a story told by writers of whom Marcel Gauchet is a much-cited example:[8] Christianity is the seed that flowers into secular humanism, destroying in the process its own transcendental orientation and making possible the terrestrial autonomy that now lies at the heart of Western democratic society. (This

contrasts with Muslim societies, which remain mired in religion.) Christianity, alone of all "religions," gives birth to a plural, democratic world; alone of all "religions," it begets unfettered human agency. The elemental *human dispossession* that characterizes all religion is paradoxically overcome by and through a unique religion: Christianity. This story of "Western Christianity" as a divine parent metamorphosing into its human offspring (modernity), as transcendence embodying itself in worldly life (secularity), as the particular introducing the universal in thought, is remarkable for the way it mimics the sacred Christian narrative in which Jesus incarnates the divine principle, dies, and is reborn to take his place at the right hand of the Father, a narrative whose telos is the redemption of all humankind. Transcendence thus remains in our redeemed world, our secular "European civilization," although now it has a different content as well as a different place. Santiago Zabala, surveying the postmetaphysical trend in Euro-American philosophy, puts it a little differently. Secularization, he writes, is not merely produced by a Christian past but is also a testament to the enduring presence of Christianity in its post-Christian mode (European civilization).[9]

How then, given the present political climate, are we to understand stories that recount the flourishing of a distinctive European civilization, with Christianity as its historical foundation, always in conflict with another called "Islamic"? As part of a political discourse, these stories assert a *European* identity. Their logical implication is that the absence of "democratic traditions" in Islamic civilization explains Muslim resort to the coercive notion of blasphemy and its inability to grasp the supreme importance of freedom. This appears self-evident. But is it?

From a sociological point of view, populations that belong to "European civilization" are highly differentiated by class, nationalism, and religious identity. They have often been riven by internal conflict, in which warring parties have used the same principle of critical public speech to attack one another, and in

which alliances have sometimes been made with Muslim princes. There have always been important movements that have sought to censor public communication in the West, to restrain and control democratic tendencies, in the name of freedom or equality or a stable order. The entire history of European countries in the Americas, Asia, and Africa (with its repressions of the indigenous populations they ruled over) has been an integral part of "European civilization." Hannah Arendt famously argued that the racist policies of European imperialism were essential to the development of fascism in Europe. It is not easy, therefore, to understand what exactly is being claimed when "democracy" and "free speech" are said to be intrinsic to "European civilization," and inequality and repression are attributed to "Islamic civilization."

True, "democratic" institutions are now more firmly established within Western states than in Middle Eastern ones,[10] and the legal systems of Muslim-majority countries were not, until they imported Western law, built around the idea of universal legal equality. But instead of regarding the concern with the particular as opposed to the universal as a *lack*, as an absence that leads to the infliction of social indignities, we might examine more closely the forms in which the universal drive to freedom appears in liberal societies. Thus, one form of universalization central to liberal politics and economics is the *substitutability* of individuals: in the arithmetic of electoral politics, each voter counts as one and is the exact equivalent of every other voter—no more, no less, and no different. Each citizen has the same right to take part in the political process, and to be heard politically, as every other. Substitutability is more fundamental to liberal democracy than electoral consent, from which Western governments are said to derive their legitimacy, because consent here is dependent on counting substitutable votes.

Substitutability is more than a principle of electoral politics. It is also a social technique essential to bureaucratic control and to market manipulation, both being ways of normalizing (and there-

fore constraining) the individual. This is why statistical modes of thinking and representation—the construction of political and economic strategies on the basis of proportions, averages, trends, and so on—are so important to modern capitalist societies. The fact that individuals have equal value and so may be substituted for one another is, however, what helps to undermine the liberal notion of personal dignity, because for the individual to count as a substitutable unit, his or her uniqueness must be discounted. Thus, even when we use Western criteria of democratic virtue, "liberal European civilization" emerges as highly contradictory.

A word on my use of the term "liberal" in this paper: I am aware that liberalism is a complex historical tradition, that Locke is not Constant and Constant is not Mill and Mill is not Rawls, that the history of liberalism in North America is not the same as that in Europe—or, for that matter, in parts of the global South where it can be said to have a substantial purchase. Liberalism isn't located simply in classical texts, and of course it jostles with other traditions in the West. In its early stages, liberal politics was engaged in challenging hegemonic power, it was full of passion. Now, more often than not, it is the ally of global power: cool, rational, and imperturbable. As a discursive space, liberalism provides its advocates with a common political and moral language in which to identify problems and to dispute them. Such ideas as individual autonomy, freedom of (economic, political, social) exchange, limitation of state power, rule of law, national self-determination, and religious toleration belong to that space, not least when their meanings are debated. Its theorists seek to present liberalism as consistent and unified, but it is precisely the contradictions and ambiguities in the language of liberalism that make the public debates among self-styled liberals and with their "illiberal" opponents possible. Liberalism thus provides moderns with a vocabulary that can cover a multitude of sins—and virtues. The word "liberty" itself has been inserted into a variety of conflicting perspectives—as the political assertions of the American

government and that of its critics make evident. I call the society in which political and moral arguments using this vocabulary are sited "liberal." The tradition in which these contradictions are embedded alerts us to the fact that the conflict is not usefully seen as one between "liberal" and "illiberal" tendencies in every civilization or country (as several writers have recently proposed). The conflict is intrinsic to liberalism as an evolving discursive tradition, and what is plausibly liberatory in one context is clearly repressive in another.

Democracy and freedom are central to "Western Civilization," and the universal right to free speech is central to democracy. Or is it? How does the idea of cultivating elite sensibilities (quality) implied by "civilization" fit with the idea of mass equality (quantity) implied by "democracy"? This question was raised in nineteenth-century Britain when the extension of the suffrage was debated. It was then, for example, that Mill argued for a system of plural voting that would give greater weight to the educated ("more civilized") classes to balance the working-class majority.[11] But the problem has remained unresolved. Answers at a philosophical level are plentiful, however, according to which some measure of trust, amicability, and self-reliance are made essential to democracy. For this reason Zabala, whom I cited earlier, believes that secularity provides the key:

> It was Dewey's merit to have argued that we achieve full political maturity only at the moment when we succeed in doing without any metaphysical culture, without the culture of belief in non-human powers and forces. Only after the French Revolution did human beings learn to rely increasingly on their own powers; Dewey called the religion that teaches men to rely on themselves a "religion of love" (the complete opposite of a "religion of fear") because it is virtually impossible to distinguish it from the condition of the citizen who participates concretely in democracy.[12]

It is worth stressing, however, that the French Revolution did

not simply introduce ideas of solidarity, democracy, and freedom into the modern world. Revolutionary armies sought to promote liberty, equality, and fraternity by conquest. The revolution inaugurated the age of modern empires, unleashing modern warfare, nationalism, racism, and genocide around the world. All of this is certainly part of "Christian" Europe's history. Of course it would be absurd to suggest that it is the sum, or the essence, of Western history, but it *is* a part. Is it not therefore also part of its inheritance? The distinguished philosopher Richard Rorty has talked about rehabilitating the idea of "the European *mission civilizatrice*" with reference to its democratic values—its unique attachment to equality and freedom.[13] But he does not explain who will decide what really represents "European values," how they will be applied, and what they will actually achieve in the world of unequal power. As recent commentators have pointed out, democratic republics are as capable of legislating repression at home and depriving the liberty of weaker peoples abroad, whether by military or economic means.

Liberalism and the Shape of Free Speech

The charge of blasphemy is said to be an archaic religious constraint, and free speech a principle essential to modern freedom. But if the West is a civilization with Christianity as its historical foundation, does the concept of blasphemy have any place in it now that the West is secularized? Are there any resemblances between the idea of blasphemy and the prohibitions established by secular law? Do prohibitions and protections relating to speech tell us something about the idea of "the human" defined by them? And how does the idea of the human serve to distinguish between "the religious" and "the secular"?

If blasphemy indicates a limit transgressed, does secular criticism signify liberation? Modern societies *do*, of course, have legal constraints on communication. Thus there are laws of copyright, patent, and trademark, and laws protecting commercial secrets,

all of which prohibit in different ways the free circulation of expressions and ideas. Are property rights in a work of art infringed if it is publicly reproduced in a distorted form by someone other than the original author with the aim of commenting on it? And if they *are* infringed, how does the sense of violation differ from claims about blasphemy? My point here is not that there is no difference, but that there are legal conditions that define what may be communicated freely, and how, in liberal democratic societies, and that consequently the flow of public speech has a particular shape by which its "freedom" is determined.

There are laws that prohibit expression in public and that appear at first sight to have nothing to do with property: for example, indecency laws and laws relating to child pornography, whose circulation is prohibited even in cyberspace. The first set of laws (copyright, and so on) you might say has to do with the workings of a market economy and so with property, whereas the second (pornography) is quite different because it deals with ethics. But although it is the laws relating to the latter whose infringement evokes the greatest passion, both sets of constraint are clues to the liberal secular ideal of the human, the proper subject of all freedoms and rights. Both sets of limits articulate different ways in which property and its protection define the person. In a secular society these laws make it possible to demarcate and defend one's self in terms of what one owns, including, above all, one's body. Thus our conceptions of "trespassing" on another's body and of "exploiting" it are matters of central concern to laws regulating sexual propriety. They also relate to slavery, a nonliberal form of property, for modern law holds that one cannot transfer ownership of one's living body to another person or acquire property rights in another's. Freedom is thus regarded as an inalienable form of property, a capacity that all individual persons possess in a state of nature, rooted in the living body. There are, of course, exceptions to this principle of absolute ownership in one's body, some old and some new: for example, suicide—destroying one-

self—is not only forbidden but also regarded by most people in liberal countries with horror, even though the person is said to be the sole owner of the body she inhabits and animates. This exception to self-ownership is often explained by secularists in terms of the humanist principle of "the dignity of human life," a principle that is not seen as conflicting with the brutality of war. Warfare is presented, regretfully, as a mode of killing and dying in the name of one's nation or of universal human redemption.

Apart from this old contradiction there is now a considerable area of legal and moral confusion regarding the ownership of donated human organs and human tissue taken as samples for medical research.[14] This confusion adds to the growing sense that the sacred conception of the self-owning human, the foundation of freedoms in modern society, is under threat. All the more reason, it would seem, for affirming his proprietary rights with vehemence.

In theory, the self-owning liberal subject has the ability to choose freely, a freedom that can be publicly demonstrated. The reality is more complicated. Famously, there are two subject positions—one economic and the other political—whose freedom is invested with value in liberal democratic society, both of which are linked to a conception of the freely choosing self and the limits that protect it. Thus, as a citizen the subject has the right to criticize political matters *openly and freely* and to vote for whichever political candidate she wishes—but she is obliged to do so *in strictest secrecy*. There is a paradox in the fact that the individual choice of candidates must be hidden to be free, while critical speech to be free must be exercised in public. This difference actually indicates that while the former takes for granted that the citizen is embedded in particular social relationships, the latter assumes that he is an abstract individual with universal rights. As an economic individual, the subject is free to work at, spend, and purchase whatever she chooses, and has the right to protect her property legally. Marx was surely right when he pointed out

that in modern liberal societies the freedom of the producer is a precondition for the growth of capital—or, as we might put it today, unrestricted consumption is a source of corporate power. What he failed to point out, however, is that *that* power in turn may limit the liberty of the citizen. Social constraint (and, as Freud has made us aware, even psychological constraint) lies at the heart of individual choice. It seems probable, therefore, that the intolerable character of blasphemy accusations in this kind of society derives not so much from their attempt to constrain as from the theological language in which the constraint is articulated. Theology invokes dependence on a transcendental power, and secularism has rejected such a power by affirming human independence. (But let's note that freedom from transcendence is secularism's *formal claim*. In fact, constraint and dependence are massively present in our secular world, transcending the individual subject-agent's ability to know and to act.)

My concern is not to make the banal argument that free speech is never totally free because in a liberal society freedom is balanced by responsibility. Instead I want to ask what the particular patterns of liberal restriction can tell us about liberal ideas of the *free* human. The self-owning individual is a famous liberal idea, and, within that conception, although there are limits to what one may do to oneself, there is greater latitude in relation to one's material property. The ownership of property doesn't only establish immunity in relation to all those who don't own it. It also secures one's right to do with it what one wishes—so long as no damage is done to the rights of others. The right to choose how to dispose of what one owns is integral to the liberal subject—and the subject's body, affections, and speech are regarded as *personal property* because they constitute the person.

I will return to this point about discourse as property, but first I want to introduce a concept central to Islamic traditional thought about free speech but not to liberal thought (or at least not central in the same way)—*seduction*.

In liberal society, rape, the subjection of a person's body against his/her wish for the purpose of sexual enjoyment is a serious crime, whereas seduction—the mere manipulation of another person's desire—is not. The first is a violence; the other is not. In the latter case, no property right is violated. Compare this understanding with that in ancient Greece, where seduction was a more serious crime than rape because it involved the capture of someone's affection and loyalty away from the man to whom they properly belonged.[15] What this indicates is not only that the woman's viewpoint did not matter legally in the ancient world, but also that in liberal society seduction is not considered a violation—except where minors are concerned. In liberal society seduction is not merely permitted, it is positively valued as a sign of individual freedom. Every adult may dispose of his or her body, affections, and speech at will, so long as no harm is done to the property of others. That is why the prohibition of seduction between adults—that is to say, of the public exchange of sexual signals—is regarded as a constraint on natural liberty itself. Such a prohibition is normally regarded as of a piece with the curtailment of free speech.

So how clear is the liberal distinction between coercion and reasoned choice that underlies the notion of free speech? There is, in fact, a large area between these two opposites in which everyday life is lived. The game of seduction—in which both consent and coercion are ambiguously present—is played in this area. And it is in this area, too, that our everyday understanding of liberty is practiced.

Thus in liberal democracies the individual as consumer and as voter is subjected to a variety of allurements through appeals to greed, vanity, envy, revenge, and so on. What in other circumstances may be identified and condemned as moral failings are here essential to the functioning of a particular kind of economy and polity. Numerous studies have described how television as a medium of communication seeks to shape viewers' choices of

commodities and candidates. (Film in general works on seducing the audience, even where no political or commercial message is intended.) To seduce is to incite someone to open up his or her innermost self to images, sounds, and words offered by the seducer and to lead the seduced—complicitly or unwittingly—to an end first conceived by the former.

Let me take up again the question of copyright that apparently marks out some of the limits to freedom of speech in liberal society. In a detailed account of the legal disputes over the perpetuity of copyright in late eighteenth-century England, Mark Rose has demonstrated how the idea of incorporeal property (the literary work) emerged through the concept of the author as proprietor. To begin with, those who argued for perpetual copyright did so on the understanding that the author had a natural property right to something he had created. When opponents of unlimited copyright insisted that ideas as such couldn't be considered property, and that copyright should therefore be treated as a limited personal right exactly like a patent, they were countered by the argument that the property being claimed was neither the physical book that could be purchased, nor the ideas communicated, but something made up of style and sentiment. "What we here observe," Rose writes, "is a twin birth, the simultaneous emergence in the discourse of the law of the proprietary author and the literary work. The two concepts are bound to each other."[16]

It should be clear that the law of copyright is not simply a constraint on free communication but also a way of defining how, when, and for whom literary communication (one of the most valued forms of freedom in modern liberal society) can be regarded as free, creative, and inalienable. A person's freedom to say whatever he or she wants, how he or she wants, depends in part on a particular notion of property. It implies a particular kind of property-owning subject whose freedom of speech rests on the truth of what is spoken—that is, created and offered to the public, *but never in its essence alienated*.

Thus, while cultural historians have already written at length on the Romantic vocabulary of national freedom movements, historians of literature have now begun to trace the Romantic roots of the concept of "the literary work" through the mutual shaping of freedom and constraint.[17] It remains to be investigated to what extent the general idea of "freedom of speech" also has those roots. Such a genealogy has still to be mapped so that we can regard it not as the demand of secular reason but as the outcome of a Romantic project aiming at the construction of virtuous human subjects.

What Does the West Understand Blasphemy to Be?

The willful destruction of signs—that is to say, the assault on images and words that are invested with the power to determine what counts as truth—has a long history of transcending the distinction between the religious and the secular. Like iconoclasm and blasphemy, secular critique also seeks to create spaces for new truth, and, like them, it does so by destroying spaces that were occupied by other signs.

The French historian Alain Cabantous once noted that when Jesus claimed for himself a divine nature, his claim was condemned as blasphemy. That blasphemy led to his death, and the death was followed by resurrection. "In this one respect," Cabantous writes, "blasphemy *founded* Christianity."[18] We might add here that every new tradition, whether it is called religious or not, is founded in a discursive rupture—which means through a kind of violence. Cabantous doesn't say this but others have done so. Some have even made the argument that the disruption of blasphemy may be seen as the attempt by a lesser violence to overcome a greater.[19] This may sometimes be the case, but I will only say that it does not follow that every blasphemous utterance is therefore a new founding; blasphemy as an act of violence (whether by the weak or the powerful) may be little more than an *obsession*, in which the act serves as the re-instantiation of an

established genre, the restoration of a style *that itself has no foundation and no content*. In other words, blasphemy may simply be violence masquerading as creative rupture.

Cabantous could have observed that in the foundation of Christianity the blasphemy was not perceived as such by *believers*. From a Christian point of view, the *charge* of blasphemy was merely an expression of disbelief. And although that disbelief eventually led to Christ's death, Christians have historically held that the violence done to him was part of a divine plan. Did Christ *know* his unbelieving listeners would take what he said as blasphemy because his crucifixion was essential to the project of human redemption? He was, after all, both man and God. Strictly speaking, of course, what founded Christianity was not blasphemy itself but a new narrative of sacrifice and redemption—a story of martyrdom (witnessing) that would be, for believers, the door to eternal life.

The Truth, said Jesus to his followers, will set you free. The unredeemed human condition is lack of freedom; free speech— truthful speech—releases the human subject from his or her servitude. The truth must be spoken openly even if those who do not possess it regard speaking it freely as blasphemy. In this context a modern New Testament scholar writes: "In spite of the opposition of those who are unbelievers, of those who criticize the apostle [John], the Christian may speak freely because he knows Him who conquers all opposition, because he knows that wonderful communion with God which transcends everything in the world."[20] Of course the liberal principle of free speech does not depend on the proviso that speech to be free must be literally true, but the Christian idea of Truth as applied to speaking and listening freely helps, I think, to explain why that principle has come to be thought of as "sacred."

Blasphemy—a sinful act that is liable to worldly punishment— has a long history in Christianity. In England it became a crime

in common law only in the seventeenth century, at a time when national courts were taking over from ecclesiastical courts and the modern state was taking shape. Common law did not distinguish between heresy (the holding of views contrary to church doctrine) and blasphemy (the utterance of insults against God or His saints), as medieval canon law had done. So, from the seventeenth century on, the crime of blasphemy was entangled with the question of political toleration and the formation of the secular modern state. Over the next two centuries, differences of legal opinion arose as to whether public statements lacking defamatory intent or expressed in moderate language were liable to criminal prosecution. It was felt that scholarly debate and discussion needed protection, even if they appeared to be "irreligious." This led to increasing legal attention being paid to the language (that is, style and context) in which "blasphemy" appeared, regardless of how disruptive of established truth it was.

The tendency to emphasize manner of expression—to see blasphemy in terms of form rather than content—had, however, some interesting legal implications: vulgar working-class speech was less protected than the polite speech of the middle and upper classes. A scholar who has studied blasphemy trials in nineteenth-century England calls them "class crimes of language" on account of the class bias they indicate.[21] That an exceptionally large number of them took place during the period when a national state and a class system began to appear is itself of some significance. For this reason I am inclined to say that, rather than simply indicating class bias, the identification of blasphemy helped to constitute class difference in which asymmetrical power was repeatedly inscribed. Therefore I want to suggest that we see blasphemy in these cases not as a discursive device for suppressing free speech but as an indicator of the shape that free speech takes at different times and in different places, reflecting, as it does so, different structures of power and subjectivity.

How Do Muslims Think of the Limits to Free Speech?

What *are* Islamic ideas of blasphemy? Obviously not all Muslims think alike, but questions about Islamic ideas of blasphemy are aimed at a moral tradition. But even that tradition contains divergences, tensions, and instabilities that cannot be attributed to an entire "civilizational people." Nevertheless, I will draw on aspects of that tradition in order to explore further some liberal ideas about freedom. One of these is the assumption that the Islamic tradition is rooted in a more restrictive system of ethics, that it does not allow the freedom (especially the freedom of speech) provided and defended by liberal society. Although there is something to this, the simple notion of liberty that is either present or absent seems to me unsatisfactory here.

It is true that Islamic religious regulation restricts the individual's right to behave as he or she wishes through public prohibition, so that the line between *morality* and *manners* (a crucial distinction for the worldly critic) is obscured and the space of choice narrowed. The worldly critic wants to see and hear everything: nothing is taboo, everything is subject to critical engagement. If speech and behavior are to be constrained, it is because they should conform (willingly?) to civility. Good manners take the place of piety; the private and the public are clearly separated. But the situation on the ground is more complicated than the simple binary (the presence or absence of choice) allows. Consider the following socio-legal situation.

The law in a liberal democracy guarantees the citizen's right to privacy, on which her moral and civic freedom rests. But with the emergence of the welfare state, new tensions arise between the abstract ideal of equality under the law and the particular ways in which the law is applied. The idea that morality is properly a "private" matter and that what is private should not be law's business has, paradoxically, contributed to the passing of legislation intended to deal with "private" trouble cases that force themselves into the legal arena. The legislation has given judges and welfare

administrators greater discretion in matters relating to the family (custody, childcare, divorce, alimony, matrimonial property, and inheritance). The sentiment guiding this move is that a more humane way of dealing with conflicts is called for, in which different personal beliefs, emotions, and circumstances can be taken into account. The individuality of the person must be respected, which means it must be fully identified. So discretion and private hearings are necessary. Displays of sensibility and hysteria (inscriptions of emotion on the body) must be observed and assessed. Justice, consequently, becomes individualized. Thus the intervention by social workers into ("private") family life in cases of suspected incest or child neglect or spousal abuse is a function of "public" law authorizing bureaucratic action in "private" domains. In short, although religious morality (piety) is not allowed to impose norms of proper speech and behavior on the individual (as would be the case in Muslim ethics), these legal developments redraw the boundaries of individual freedom. The subject's right to relate to her own children is circumscribed by the welfare agency's right to inspect and intervene in that relationship. New sensibilities regarding what is decent—and therefore also what is outrageous—are created, especially in the domain of sexual relations. The uninvited intrusion into domestic space, the breaching of "private" domains, is disallowed in Islamic law, although conformity in "public" behavior may be much stricter. Thus, the limits of freedom are differently articulated in relation to spaces that may roughly be described as "private" and "public," and different kinds of discourse are socially available to distance what is repugnant, whether transcendent or worldly.

This brings me to the Islamic vocabulary that overlaps in some respects with *blasphemy*, a category that defines an outrageous "religious" transgression in the Christian tradition.

Although the Arabic word *tajdīf* is usually glossed in English as "blasphemy" and is used by Christian Arabs to identify what in European religious history is called "blasphemy," Arabic speak-

ers, in the case of the Danish cartoons, did not (so far as I am aware) employ it. The theological term *tajdīf* has the particular sense of "scoffing at God's bounty."[22] Of course, there are other words that overlap with the English word *blasphemy* (for example, *kufr*, "apostasy, blasphemy, infidelity"; *ridda*, "apostasy"; *fisq*, "moral depravity"; and *ilhād*, "heresy, apostasy"), but these were not, to my knowledge, used in response to the Danish cartoons. As accusations against non-Muslim journalists, they would, in any case, be inappropriate. When the World Union of Muslim Scholars made its statement on the Danish cartoons affair, for example, it used the word *isā'ah*, not *tajdīf*. And *isā'ah* has a range of meanings, including "insult, harm, and offense," that are applied in secular contexts.[23] (One of the cartoons, it will be recalled, depicts the Prophet Muhammad as a suicide bomber—a figure at once absurd and barbaric.) The World Union states that it has purposely let a long time pass in order to allow the efforts of numerous Islamic and Arab organizations, and several states, to elicit an appropriate expression of remorse, but the wait has been to no avail. Therefore "the Union will be obliged to call upon the millions of Muslims in the world to boycott Danish and Norwegian products and activities."[24] The freedom to campaign against particular consumer goods is opposed to the freedom to criticize beliefs publicly: One social weapon faced another, each employing a different aspect of the modern idea of freedom. If physical violence was sometimes used by some of those who advocated a boycott, this should not obscure the fact that a commercial boycott is always a kind of violence, especially if it is infused with anger, because it attacks people's livelihood. The European history of boycotts (the refusal to purchase commodities) and strikes (the withholding of labor), with all their accompanying violence, has been a story of the struggle for modern rights. And yet in the present case European commentators described the two differently: the one as an expression of freedom, the other as an attempt at restricting it, and thus as yet another sign of the con-

flict between two civilizations having opposed political orientations. In liberal democratic thinking the principle of free speech cannot be curtailed by the offense its exercise may cause—so long as it is not defamatory or a threat to social order.

More interesting than the political defense of free speech was the philosophical argument that it was even a good thing that pious Muslims felt injured, because being hurt by criticism might provoke people to reexamine their beliefs—something vital both for democratic debate and for ethical decision making. This point, in contrast to the first, valorizes the consequence of free speech rather than the act itself. The criticism of questionable (religious) beliefs is presented as an obligation of free speech, an act carried out in the belief that truth is power. Many even in post-Christian Western society agree with the Christian claim that *the truth makes one free* (John 8:32).

That this is not an Islamic formulation emerges from an examination of the widely discussed trial of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a professor at Cairo University, for apostasy (*ridda*) because he had advocated a radically new interpretation of the revealed text of the Qur'an.[25] Of course both *truth* and *freedom* are greatly valued in the Islamic tradition, but they are not tied up together quite as they are in Christianity. (It may be pointed out in passing that the many cases of apostasy in the contemporary Middle East that have received so much publicity in the West are actually relatively recent and closely connected with the formation of the modern nation-state, a modern judiciary, and the rise of modern politics. In this context one may recall the burst of blasphemy trials in nineteenth-century England to which I referred earlier.) A question worth considering, however, is whether these trials should be seen solely in terms of the suppression of freedom: What do they tell us about the liberal idea of the human subject?

In a book that deals with the Abu Zayd case,[26] Islamist lawyer Muhammad Salīm al-'Awwa emphasizes that the Sharia (the "religious law") guarantees freedom of belief. "Freedom of belief

means the right of every human being to embrace whatever ideas and doctrines he wishes, even if they conflict with those of the group in which he lives or to which he belongs, or conflicts with what the majority of its members regard as true."[27] He goes on to say that no one may exert pressure to get another to reveal his/her religious beliefs—that is to say, the Sharia prohibits the use of inquisitorial methods.[28] The right to think whatever one wishes does not, however, include the right to express one's religious or moral beliefs publicly with the intention of converting people to a false commitment. Such a limitation may seem strange to modern liberals (although it was not strange to Kant),[29] for whom the ability to speak publicly about one's beliefs is necessary to freedom. It is, after all, one aspect of "the freedom of religion" that is guaranteed by a secular liberal democracy. Al-ʿAwwa is aware of this, and he cites two Qurʾanic verses that seem to guarantee freedom of religion: *lā ikrāha fi-ddīn*, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), and *faman shāʾa falyuʾmin wa man shāʾa falyakfur*, "let him who wills have faith, and him who wills reject it" (18:29). But for the community, what matters is the Muslim subject's social practices—including verbal publication—not her internal thoughts, whatever these might be. In contrast, the Christian tradition allows that thoughts can commit the sin of blasphemy and should therefore be subject to discipline: thoughts are subject to confession.[30]

According to al-ʿAwwa, publishing one's thoughts changes their character, makes them publicly accessible signs: "To publish something," he quotes an old saying, "is to lay oneself open to the public."[31] It is one thing to think whatever one wishes, he argues, and a different thing to seduce others into accepting commitments that are contrary to the moral order. In a well-known book published in Lebanon in 1970, responding to the accusation of apostasy against the Syrian philosopher Jalal Sadiq al-ʿAzm for his famous *Naqd al-fikr al-dīnī* (*The Critique of Religious Thought*; 1969), Shaykh ʿUthman Safi makes a similar distinction but

without reference to Islamic religious authorities. His approach instead is to make an explicit distinction between "natural, innate freedom" and freedom as defined and limited by the law. The individual may give free rein to his thought and imagination, accepting or rejecting as he wishes within the limits of what he contemplates. "When these possibilities of freedom that the human being enjoys remain within his soul, the law, especially, cannot interfere with them except when the belief is moved from secrecy to broad daylight [*min as-sirr ila al-jahr*]."[32] When, in the Abu Zayd case, the highest court of appeal in Egypt distinguished between the inviolability enjoyed by private belief and the vulnerability of published statements to the charge of *kufr* ("apostasy, blasphemy, infidelity"), the court was saying that the legal *meaning* of the latter was not to be decided by its *origin* in the intention of a particular author but by its *function* in a social relation. The effect of his making them public was therefore his responsibility. This position is close to, but not identical with, a modern liberal view.

The liberal view, in general, assumes that the crucial relationship in this matter is between two things: a person, on the one hand, and the written or spoken words he or she asserts and believes to be true (assents mentally to) on the other. These statements are—like all empirical statements—subject to criteria of verification. Belief, however, has an ambiguous status—at once internal and external. It is the internal sense that most modern Westerners have taken as being primary, although it is generally recognized that it is possible to externalize it. Thus, when Kilian Bälz writes that "belief is a spiritual affair which is not readily accessible to investigation in the court room,"[33] he is restating the secular idea of "religious belief" understood as a private spiritual matter. But the statement that "religious belief" is not readily accessible in a courtroom should be understood, I suggest, as a claim of immunity (the court has no right to intrude) rather than of principled skepticism about the court's practical ability to extract the absolute truth. It is quite different, in other words, from the

classical Sharia tradition, in which Islamic jurists adopt the principle of epistemological skepticism, insisting that the judge cannot distinguish with absolute certainty a truthful utterance from a lie when that is unsupported by sensory experience. Although divine revelation, together with the tradition of the Prophet and the consensus of jurists, *do* provide Muslims with "indisputable and certain knowledge" (*'ilm yaqin*), jurists held that this certainty relates to the legal and ethical rules they establish and not to the truth of what claimants say are facts in a given case.[34] A secular state, by contrast, has to determine whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to a "religion"—a particular "religion"—and therefore qualifies the believer or practitioner to equal treatment with members of other "religions."[35] Hence belief *must* be externalizable as doctrine ("I hold the following things to be true"), whether voluntarily or by force.

The issue in the Abu Zayd case is not the correctness or otherwise of "belief" in this sense, but the legal and social consequences of a Muslim professor's teaching a doctrine that was said to be contrary to Islamic commitment.[36] (The Arabic word *imān* is often translated into English as "belief"—as in the frequently used Qur'anic phrase *ayyuhal-mu'minīn*, "O Believers!"—but is better rendered as "faith," as in "I shall be faithful to you." Another word commonly glossed as "belief," *i'tiqād*, derives from the root *'aqada*, "to put together." This root gives the word *'aqd*, "contract," and its many cognates, and thus carries a sense of social relationship. Its primary sense in classical Arabic is the bond that commits the believer to God.)[37] In the classic Sharia position, the strength of personal conviction is said to be a matter between the individual and his God (*baynahu wa bayna rabbih*). Belief in this context is understood as a continuum rather than as a binary (belief/disbelief or certainty/doubt) so that it is possible to describe someone as "weakly believing."

Disbelief incurs no legal punishment; even the Qur'an stipulates no worldly punishment for disbelief. In the classical law,

punishment for apostasy is justified on the grounds of its political and social consequences, not of entertaining false doctrine itself. Put another way, insofar as the law concerns itself with disbelief, it is not as a matter of its propositional untruth but of a solemn social relationship being openly repudiated ("being unfaithful"). Legally, apostasy (*ridda*, *kufr*) can therefore be established only on the basis of the functioning of external signs (including public speech or writing, publicly visible behavior), never on the basis of inferred or forcibly extracted internal belief.[38]

In contemporary Egypt, conviction of a Muslim for apostasy in a court of law has consequences for civil status because the Sharia is the law of personal status there. One consequence is the automatic dissolution of an apostate's marriage if it was contracted according to the Sharia. There are also social consequences, among them the concern that an apostate who is responsible for teaching Islamic thought may suppress the truth through the unrestrained publications of spoken and written signs. (This point should not be confused with the judgment of the Court of Appeal in the Abu Zayd case when it declared that an attack on Islam is an attack on the foundations of Egypt as a Muslim state. *That* consequentialist argument—as well as claims that the feelings of Muslims are offended—is quite different.)

The crucial distinction made in liberal thought between *seduction* and *forcible subjection* to which I referred earlier, in which the former is legally permitted and the latter penalized, is here absent—at least in al-'Awwa's argument. To seduce someone is to connive at rendering him or her unfaithful, to make the other break an existing social commitment. Even in medieval Christendom, the term *infidelitas* could be used not only in relation to personal departures from authorized doctrine but also, in a secular sense, to breaking a contract.[39] "Unfaithfulness" in this worldly sense now has a quaint ring about it in modern liberal society and relates only to sexual seduction.

In Islamic theology, seduction is a matter of great concern—and

not merely in the sexual sense. The Qur'an contains numerous words that can be glossed as "seducing" and "deluding"—among them the verbal roots *fatana*, *rāwada*, *gharra*. *Fatana* (from which comes the familiar noun *fitna*) always has the sense of "temptation and affliction as a testing," of "persecution, treachery, or social strife."[40] But the temptation referred to by this term in the Qur'an is not sexual. (Even in modern Arabic, *fitna* is not used exclusively in a sexual sense; it can also mean enchantment and fascination generally.) It is the word *rāwada* that is used in the Qur'an to refer explicitly to sexual seduction. *Gharra* refers to delusion through attachment to fancies, to the act of deceiving oneself. The nominal form *ighrā'* can be glossed as "excessive attachment, self-love, desire, incitement," but it also connotes social unrest and instability. Muslim theologians and jurists assumed that seduction in all its forms was necessarily dangerous not only for the individual (because it indicated a loss of self-control) but for the social order too (it could lead to violence and civil discord). They were wrong, of course, because they didn't know about market democracy, a system that thrives on the consumer's loss of self-control and one in which politicians have learned to seduce their audiences while maintaining overall political stability.

So under what circumstances can one say that one is choosing what one truly believes—or that one's true beliefs are expressed only when one chooses freely? On the other hand, when can one say that it is in expressing one's beliefs *because one must* that one provides evidence of what one's true beliefs are?

According to Susan Mendus,[41] John Locke propounded his theory of political toleration on the basis of the psychological principle that belief can never be determined by the will. This principle rests on a new psychology of the will that was beginning to emerge in seventeenth-century Europe, as well as a new understanding of "belief." In the Middle Ages a contrary doctrine prevailed. Thomas Aquinas, for example, took it for granted that belief (a commitment, a holding dear) could indeed be willed. It

was this modern psychology that allowed Locke to insist that the Prince's attempt to coerce religious belief—including belief in the salvational implications of religious practices—was irrational. All that force could secure was an insincere profession of faith. Of course, the Prince might have other reasons for imposing conformity on his subjects than their salvation—such as upholding law and order—that would not render his coercive efforts necessarily irrational. The presumption that political attempts to coerce belief are irrational because they are impossible has been the focus of much debate summarized by Mendus. The Muslim position, as expounded by al-'Awwa, is different from Locke's. Since, according to the latter, it is impossible to coerce belief, the mind becomes the site of true religious belonging, and physical force as the arm of civil government should therefore confine itself to civil interests—the protection of life, limb, and property—only. According to the former, religious *belonging*, as distinct from religious belief, *can* be forced, or seduced, but it is illegitimate to do so. (This accords, incidentally, with the central Islamic tradition about Christians and Jews, whose understanding of divine revelation is considered to be distorted—the Qur'an is perfect—*but who are not therefore required to abjure their error.*) What matters, finally, is belonging to a particular way of life in which the person does not own himself.

Mendus's view is that Locke was right to make the presumption about the impossibility of coercing religious belief, and she defends him against his critics on this point by making what she regards a critical distinction within the individual's consciousness—a difference between *sincere* and *authentic* belief—that she borrows from Bernard Williams. This allows her to argue that a forcible conversion (brainwashing) may at most obtain a *sincere* belief, not an *authentic* one. But the conditions cited by Mendus—beginning with the so-called acceptance condition—are, I think, questionable. Thus her claim that the alternatives of deliberate reticence (not saying what one really believes) and insincerity (affirming

what one doesn't believe) must *always* exist as possibilities in order to determine whether a belief is really authentic or genuine seems to me unconvincing. The alternatives at issue must surely signify something more than abstract *possibilities*; they must be to the person concerned *real options*, within a given socio-psychological situation, from among which he can actually choose. But if that is so, then certain kinds of religious acts are ruled out a priori: "bearing witness" in public where one feels *one has no choice* but to speak the truth—in anger, say, or in compassion—would have to be identified as "inauthentic."[42] Should the impossibility of remaining silent about what one believes to be morally right in such situations—or the impossibility of saying what one does *not* believe—be taken to mean that the belief is inauthentic?

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this talk of philosophical criteria determining "authentic belief" is little more than a way of devaluing moral passion, of disregarding the way passion constitutes moral actions so as to render the language of choice irrelevant. One consequence of that devaluation is that it becomes difficult for the secular liberal to understand the passion that informs those for whom, rightly or wrongly, *it is impossible to remain silent when confronted with blasphemy*, those for whom blasphemy is neither "freedom of speech" nor the challenge of a new truth but something that seeks to disrupt a living relationship.

It is important to note that passionate reaction to "blasphemers" is typically directed not at the latter's disbelief but at their alleged violence. I stress that I make no claim to know the real motives of all those who protest against blasphemy. My argument is that we will not understand "blasphemy" if all we see in it is a threat to freedom—even though it is true that, historically, powerful punitive apparatuses have usually accompanied the charge of "blasphemy."

Historical Notes on the Idea of Secular Criticism

In an essay entitled "Secular Criticism," the noted literary

critic Edward Said wrote that "[c]riticism…is always situated, it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings."[43] To this I would merely add three questions: First, what work does the notion "secular" do here? Does it refer to an authority or a sensibility? Second, since criticism employs judgment, since it seeks conviction—of oneself and others—to what extent does it therefore seek to overcome skepticism? Finally, if secular criticism regards itself as confronting the powerful forces of repression, finds itself open to all "failings," can we say that secular criticism aspires to be *heroic*?

So: *what is critique?*

This, of course, is the title of a well-known late essay by Michel Foucault, which began as a lecture originally given at the Sorbonne on 27 May 1978.[44] In the essay Foucault seeks to equate critique with the Kantian notion of Enlightenment and thus to present critique as the singular characteristic of the modern West: "[It] seems that between the lofty Kantian enterprise and the small polemico-professional activities that bear the name 'critique,' there was in the modern West (dating, roughly, from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century) a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, likewise of acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others, and all this one might name 'the critical attitude'" (p. 382). It is not clear whether Foucault wishes us to understand that "the critical attitude" is a characteristic only of the modern West, or that "the critical attitude" distinctive of the modern West is quite different from what is found elsewhere—an attitude that enables it to think for the first time of "the transcendent" in a way that permits humanity to make its own future. At any rate, it is clear that in Foucault's view to be enlightened is to adopt a critical attitude, and to engage in critique, as the West has done for several centuries, is equivalent to living in Enlightenment: living heroically, as Kant put it at the beginning of that venture. This seems to me somewhat surpris-

ing coming from a genealogist, because it sets aside the need to think through the various historical determinants whose effect—in different circumstances—has been a diversity of "critiques," a diversity of styles, uses, and objectives. Neither the concept nor the practice of critique has a simple history, and that genealogy has yet to be written. What follows is simply a set of disparate historical notes (in which I do not, incidentally, offer any fixed definition of critique, and therefore do not follow any strict distinction between criticism and critique).

The word *criticism* has its origin in the Greek verb *krino*, meaning "to separate," "to decide," "to judge," "to fight," "to accuse." It seems to have been first used in the juridical sphere, where both the act of accusing and the giving of a verdict were called *krino*, and thus referred to the ability to differentiate, to ask probing questions, and to judge. In this worldly arena the semantic beginnings of what we now call "critique" did not aspire to conquer universal truth but to resolve particular crises justly and to correct particular virtues within a particular way of life.[45]

Criticism could also take the form of "free and open speech [*parrhesia*]" in the political forum. Critical preaching, especially associated with the Cynic philosophers of the fourth century BC, was directed at everyone, and its aim was to teach people how to assess their own personal mode of life.[46] Christianity drew on this tradition of free and open speech, transforming the word *parrhesia* in the process to its own end. Criticism and the open call to Truth have remained an important part of popular preaching throughout the Christian era.

In the late medieval period, friars preached in public places, censuring particular ways of living and advocating the Truth. At an academic level, the idea of critique was employed in a number of university disciplines, but not until the theological disputes of the Reformation did it denote the same notion regardless of whether it was applied to classical texts, the Bible, or social life. So to the question, what is critique? the answer would then more

often than not have been: The evaluation and interpretation of the truth of scripture.

At first, criticism aimed only at the production of an authentic text and at its meaning, but eventually, as it began to be concerned with the reality represented in the texts, it became what would be called historical criticism—of the newly recovered Greek texts as well as of the scriptures themselves. Pierre Bayle, the seventeenth-century skeptic, exemplifies this development.[47] For him, critique was the activity that separated reason from revelation by the systematic exposure of errors and by the rhetoric of ridicule. In effect, Bayle tried to analyze and dissolve each theory by a continuous demand for reasons, and so to demonstrate that everything confidently accepted on the grounds of reason could be undone by critical reasoning. The use of critique here turned out to be as much an argument for the necessity of faith as it was an attack on the absolute reliability of reason. This was not the old theological use of reason to underwrite revelation, but a new, secular demonstration that if critique is pushed far enough it collapses under its own weight. Politically, Bayle's extreme skepticism was premised on the notion of an egalitarian "republic of letters," in which one could engage equally with others instead of submitting to authority. In the newly emerging discipline of experimental philosophy, criticism took a prudent middle position between skepticism and credulity. In this seventeenth-century culture of knowledge production, social trust and gentlemanly authority became—as Steven Shapin has shown—the basis of reliable testimony and restrained criticism.[48]

At the end of the eighteenth century, Kantianism dominated philosophical discourse. Of course philosophy was not the only mode in which criticism was publicly conducted. A variety of representational forms, unconnected with philosophy, drew on the rich tradition of literary and rhetorical devices to attack social pretensions and political corruption. But the downgrading of rhetoric in nineteenth-century language theories reinforced

the claims of philosophy to a unique conceptual domain within which *rational critique* could be properly defined and practiced.

For Kantians, political revolution thus appeared as the alternative to philosophical criticism; freedom for philosophical critique even became a condition of forestalling political revolution. It was Kant who replaced the model of the "republic of letters" with another model: the "court of reason." This followed not only from his direct philosophical concern with *judgment* but also indirectly from his view that truth was guaranteed not by freedom from political and ecclesiastical constraint but by the progress of rational science. To the "court of reason" was given the important task of imposing peace on the apparently unending war of doctrines. For Enlightenment philosophers prior to Kant, critique had been rooted in a secularized metaphysics (in the idea of human reason) and directed against ecclesiastical and state pretensions. For Kant, critique became the process of epistemological self-correction by strict reference to established rational limits and the fixed boundary between private faith and public reason. But his formula for critique as an inquiry into the preconditions of scientific truths cut it off from politics as well as from faith. In Kant's political philosophy it is *law*, not critique, that ends the chaos of metaphysics and holds the corrosive effects of skepticism in check. And its concern is no longer with mundane life but with epistemology.

Only when the Romantics returned to problems of aesthetics was the dominance of Kantian discourse challenged in philosophy. The most prominent figure here is Hegel, who took critique to be immanent in history: transcendental reason and phenomenal object (thought and reality) should not be separated, as Kant had separated them. They are both, Hegel maintained, dialectical constituents of the real—contradictory parts of a developing self and of a world in the process of becoming. In this way, Hegelians set aside the Kantian discipline of epistemology. From this move emerged the famous Marxian dictum that critical theory—the activity of criticizing publicly—is itself a part of social reality.

Marx's Hegelian premise that the existing world is characterized by contradictions led him, however, to the anti-Hegelian conclusion that their removal depended not on new philosophical interpretations but on the practical transformation of reality itself. The reality to be transformed was politico-economic, not moral. In a rapidly industrializing world, critique and revolutionary violence thus no longer appeared as alternatives but as complementary forms of class struggle, and the critical politics this called for was the politics of organized working-class movements.[49]

In the twentieth century, neo-Kantians again limited the concept of critique to epistemology, with the intention of opposing Hegelianism and Marxism. Critique then became a weapon directed at ideological politics and radical intellectuals. Among this group of philosophers, criticism again became the criterion of universal reason, a principle held to be crucial for the natural *and* the human sciences. They defined a scientific fact as one that can be criticized—and that can therefore be falsified. Because religious values are immune to rational critique, because they are based on *faith*, they are neither neutral nor objective, and they cannot therefore have the authority of scientific facts. To the extent that a "belief" is presented as a candidate for truth, it must be held provisionally—that is to say, it must not be taken too seriously. Falsificationists like Popper reaffirmed a more direct connection between epistemology (what are the criteria for valid knowledge about the world) and politics (how can one legitimately use power to make or remake the social world). Because our scientific knowledge of the world is inevitably limited, so they argued, only piecemeal criticism and reform of the social world was rational.[50]

My final example is of secular critique as modern theology. Theology has never been without criticism, and, especially since the beginning of the nineteenth century, theology has absorbed secular criticism. The example I now cite deals with metacriticism: the Regensburg lecture by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, whose opening salvo against Islam evoked predictable anger from

Muslims across the world.[51] What he believed he was doing in this lecture is not of concern to me here. What *is* interesting is the way he links his discursive attack on Islam to his critique of European reason. According to Benedict, Islamic theology separates the concept of God from reason (making God utterly unpredictable, therefore irrational), whereas Christianity maintains their inseparability in its harmonization of Hellenic rationality with the status of the divine: "In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God, says the Evangelist." According to Benedict, this fusion explains why Christianity seeks to lead the individual to the Truth through reasoned persuasion, and why Islam, in contrast, uses force to convert non-Muslims and to punish people for holding false beliefs. The inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry that constituted Christianity "was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history—it is an event that concerns us even today." Hence, Benedict's critique of the successive waves of de-Hellenization in European thought—from the Reformation via Kant and liberal theology to scientific positivism—by which, he claims, the inner bond between faith and reason is ruptured. In spite of his polemic against what he takes to be Islamic doctrine (and therefore, arguably, against Muslim immigrants in Europe) and in spite of his assertion that Europe is fundamentally Christian, Benedict's critique is not merely political: it is aimed, in a very secular way, at reaffirming the identification of reason with divinity. His critique of de-Hellenization deals with what he regards as a dangerous restriction of reason's scope—and he calls, therefore, for an unrestricted pursuit and enunciation of the truth. The truth must be presented publicly even if those not possessing it regard the presentation as outrageous—as blasphemy. This is how Benedict concludes his university lecture: "This attempt… at a critique of modern reason from within has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting

the insights of the modern age… The scientific ethos, moreover, is—as you yourself mentioned, Magnificent Rector—*the will to be obedient to the truth*, and, as such, it embodies an attitude which belongs to the essential decisions of the Christian spirit." Thus, while for Kant critical reason appeals to transcendental law (while paradoxically insisting on the autonomy of the individual subject), Benedict gestures to a Christian life of obedience that accepts *logos* as at once persuasive *reason* and divine *authority*. The Christian obeys not simply because she thinks it reasonable to do so but also because the authority of the truth *compels her to obey*. This Christian critique thus offers to accommodate the "insights" of the scientific ethos but also claims to found itself in the authority of the church.

The modern philosophers I've mentioned—Kant, Hegel, Popper—were all attached to universities, and it is in universities that critique of one kind or another has become essential to useful knowledge production. *Professional* critique, however, has less to do with the right of free speech than with the reproduction of intellectual disciplines and the culture of belief that goes with them. Jon Roberts and James Turner, in *The Sacred and Secular University*, have described the emergence of the modern university in the United States, together with its secular culture, starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They recount how the marginalization or exclusion of formal "religion" in the American university was accompanied by an emphasis on research, professionalization, and specialization, and how these things, in turn, led to a fragmentation of the traditional map of knowledge, which had until then been articulated in a theological language. It was in this situation that the humanities eventually emerged out of the traditions of moral philosophy and philology, and restored coherence to knowledge while according it a distinctive "religious" aura. One consequence was that a less sectarian, less doctrinal idea of religion became part of a liberal culture and therefore part of its understanding of criticism. "This new edition

of liberal education had two key elements," they write. "The first was to acquaint students with beauty, especially as manifest in 'poetry' broadly conceived.… A second element thus entered the humanities: a stress on continuities linking the 'poetry' of one era to that of succeeding periods and ultimately our own." Hence, there developed a sharper sense of imparting the moral essence of European civilization to students in higher education through the study of great literature and the conviction that *literary criticism* was the disciplined means to that end. This is one aspect of criticism that has religious roots without being religious, with its emphasis not on *doubt* but on a particular kind of cultivation of the self. But there is another.

Over the last few centuries, modern powers have encouraged and used the developing sciences to normalize and regulate social life—and therefore have legitimized a particular kind of disciplinary criticism. That is why, perhaps, critique that is integral to the growth of useful knowledge—and therefore of modern power—is part of a process whose major lineaments have not been effectively reduced to skepticism, a process that is rarely itself the object of effective public critique. Thus, while the freedom to criticize is represented as being at once a right and a duty of the modern individual, its truth-producing capacity remains subject to disciplinary criteria, while its material conditions of existence (laboratories, buildings, research funds, publishing houses, personal computers, etc.) are provided and watched over by corporate and state power to ensure that citizens can be *useful*.

IN PRESENTING THESE NOTES on thoughts about critique, I have tried to underline the very different understandings people have had of it in Western history, understandings that can't be reduced to the simple distinction between secular criticism (freedom and reason) and religious criticism (intolerance and obscurantism). The practice of secular criticism is now a sign of the modern, of the modern subject's relentless pursuit of truth and freedom, of

his or her political agency. It has almost become a *duty*, closely connected to the right to free expression and communication.

But every critical discourse has institutional conditions that define what it is, what it recognizes, what it aims at, what it is destroying—and why. Neither philosophical nor literary criticism can successfully claim to be the privileged site of reason. It matters whether the criticism/critique in question is conducted in the form of parody and satire, confession of sins, political autocritique, professional criticism, or speech under analysis. One might say that if these are all possible instances of critique/criticism, then what we have here is a family concept for which it is not possible to provide a single theory because the *practices* that constitute them differ radically.

And yet there is, perhaps, something distinctive after all about the historical concept of "critique" that Foucault wanted to identify, something other than the varieties of critical practice to which I have pointed: In some areas of our modern life, there is the insistent demand that reasons be given for almost everything. The relation to knowledge, to action, and to other persons *that results when this demand is taken as the foundation of all understanding* is perhaps what Foucault had in mind when he spoke of critique.

"The critical attitude" is the essence of secular heroism.

Blasphemy as the Breaking of Taboo

The recent European discourse on blasphemy as applied to the behavior of Muslim immigrants in Europe serves, paradoxically, at once to confirm and to deny difference. Angry Muslim responses to the publication of the Danish cartoons are seen by secularists as attempting to reintroduce a category that was once a means of oppression in Europe, while they see themselves critiquing, in the name of freedom, the power to suppress human freedom. For the worldly critic, there can be no acceptable taboos. When limits are critiqued, taboos disappear and freedom is expanded. This criti-

cism doesn't merely liberate ideas from taboos, however; it also reinforces the existing distinction between the paradigmatically human and candidates for inclusion in true humanity who do not as yet own their bodies, emotions, and thoughts. It reinforces, in other words, the ideological status of European Muslims as not fully human because they are not yet morally autonomous and politically disciplined.

The modern problem of blasphemy, one might say, is a European invention. For a secular society that doesn't acknowledge the existence of such a thing as blasphemy, it is quite remarkable how much public discourse there is about it—and about those who complain of it or claim to be affronted by it. Quite remarkable, too, is the obsessive need to repeat again and again the words and images that secularists know will be regarded by the pious with horror. Who, one might wonder, are these defenders of worldly criticism trying to convince? It is too simple, I think, to claim—as some Danish commentators have done—that the publication of the cartoons merely sought to overcome the crippling fear that Europeans had of criticizing Muslims.[52] But there is certainly something complicated going on beyond the rational defense of political freedom, something that may have to do with reassuring the limitless self by making a distinction between good and bad violence, with a desire that is impossible.

The limits to possible forms of action are articulated by social values. And of course all such limits are invested with potential violence, even (especially) the value of limitless self-creation. Certainly the violent language and the riots that greeted the Danish cartoons are evidence of one kind of concern about limits. But so too are the modern wars (preemptive and humanitarian) that seek to establish a particular moral order in the world or to make liberal democracy safe within its own bounded spaces—in "Fortress Europe."

Here is a final thought: What would happen if religious language were to be taken more seriously in secular Europe and the

preventable deaths in the global South of millions from hunger and war was to be denounced as "blasphemy," as the flouting of ethical limits for the sake of what is claimed to be freedom? What if this were to be done without any declarations of "belief," and yet done in all seriousness as a way of rejecting passionately the aspiration to totalized global control? Of course Europe's proscription of theological language in the political domain makes such a use of the word "blasphemy" inconceivable. But does this impossibility merely signal a secular reluctance to politicize "religion," or is it the symptom of an incapacity?

This question is not intended as a moral reproof but as an invitation to look again at an empirical feature of modernity, especially the notion of secular criticism.

An earlier version of this essay was published as "Reflections on Blasphemy and Secular Criticism," in Hent de Vries, ed., Religion: Beyond a Concept *(New York, 2007).*

Endnotes

[1] On September 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a number of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, an act seen as insulting to him by many Muslims. The result was widespread protest and controversy in Europe and elsewhere.

[2] The Western press has made much of the irrational violence of Muslims responding to the publication of the cartoons, but it has rarely noted the political atmosphere in which Muslims live in Europe generally and in Denmark particularly. According to a Danish researcher, respectable members of parliament from a variety of Danish parties made the following statements to the national press in the 2001 elections: "Muslims are just waiting for the right moment to kill us" (Mogens Camre, Progress Party); "Certain people pose a security risk solely because of their religion, which means that they have to be placed in internment camps" (Inge Dahl Sorensen, Liberal Party); "If you try to legislate your way out of these problems [concerning Muslim organizations], it is a historical rule that rats always find new holes if you cover up the old ones" (Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, Social Democratic Party). Quoted in P. Hervik, "The Emergence of Neo-Nationalism in Denmark, 1992–2001," in *Neo-Nationalism in Europe and Beyond: Perspectives from Social Anthropology,* ed. Marcus Banks and Andre Gingrich (Oxford, 2006).

[3] "The prolonged and violent demonstrations against the Danish cartoons," wrote George Packer, *New Yorker* staff writer, "were a staged attempt by Islamists to intimidate their enemies in their own countries and in the West"; "Fighting Faiths: Can liberal internationalism be saved?" *New Yorker,* July 10 and 17, 2006, pp. 95–96.

[4] "For example, parts of the Danish press as well as Danish politicians have recently argued that Islamic Studies scholars are acting as political agents because they intentionally choose to disregard certain topics, such as social processes in which Islam can be seen as an obstacle to integration and/or a potential security threat"; from *Research on Islam Repositioned*, theme statement for seminar sponsored by Danish research network *Forum for the Research on Islam* (FIFO), University of Copenhagen, May 14–15, 2007. And yet, according to the first Europol report on terrorism published in 2007, it appears that of 498 acts of terrorism that took place in the European Union during 2006, Islamists were responsible for only one. The largest number was carried out by Basque separatists, and only one of these Basque attacks resulted in loss of life. Yet more than half

of those arrested on suspicion of terrorism were Muslim. Almost all the media in Europe have ignored these figures while playing up "the threat of Islam." What, one wonders, accounts for this curious voluble silence?

5   Lecture of the Holy Father, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," September 2006, University of Regensberg, Germany: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/ september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_ en.html. In contrast, the distinguished Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of "the unbridgeable gulf between Christianity and Greek philosophy." See the introduction to his *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

6   Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man,* afterword to the reprint edition (New York, 2006). See also the dialogue between an American nonreligious postmodern philosopher and an Italian Christian postmodern theologian, in which both agree on the fundamental link between Christianity and democracy: Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion,* ed. Santiago Zabala (New York, 2005).

7   George Grote, *History of Greece* (London, 2001).

8   Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion,* foreword by Charles Taylor (Princeton, 1997).

9   See Santiago Zabala's essay "A Religion Without Theists or Atheists," which introduces Rorty and Vattimo, *Future of Religion,* p. 2.

10 The Middle East is not, of course, equivalent to "the world of Islam"—or even to "Muslim-majority countries," since most Muslims live outside the Middle East. And yet in the Western imaginary Muslim countries of the Middle East are seen as "the central lands of Islam," just as "Christianity" is usually taken to mean Latin Christianity and does not refer to the important (and continuous) Christian communities in Muslim-majority countries.

11 See John Stuart Mill's "Representative Government," esp. chap. 8 (1861), in *Three Essays* (London, 1973).

12 Zabala, "A Religion Without Theists or Atheists," p. 6.

13 Rorty and Vattimo, *Future of Religion*, p. 72.

14 R. Alta Charo, J.D., "Body of Research—Ownership and Use of Human Tissue," *New England Journal of Medicine* 355 (October 12, 2006).

15 K. J. Dover, "Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behaviour," in Mark Golden and Peter Toohey, eds., *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 117–18.

16 Mark Rose, "The Author as Proprietor: *Donaldson v. Becket* and the Genealogy of Modern Authorship," *Representations* 23 (Summer 1988).

[17] See Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (1984).

[18] Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2002), p. 5.

[19] Hent de Vries has made precisely this argument by drawing on Derrida as well as Benjamin in his excellent *Religion and Violence* (Baltimore, 2002).

[20] W. C. Van Unnik, "The Christian's Freedom of Speech in the New Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 44 (1962): p. 487.

[21] See Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1998). Marsh deals with more than two hundred blasphemy trials, all of which had a strong class component.

[22] See Edward William Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863). See also A. de Biberstein Kazimirski's *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français* (Cairo, 1875), which gives "Blasphémer Dieu, et faire nargue de ses bienfaits."

[23] In this respect it overlaps with such words as *shatima, sabb, istihāna*.

[24] *Bayān al-ittihād hawl nashr suwar masī'a li-rrasūl* (Statement of the [World] Union [of Islamic Scholars] About the Publication of Images Insulting to the Prophet), Cairo, January 23, 2006: www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=4143&version=1&template_id=116&parent_id=114.

[25] The book that got Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd declared an apostate (and hence no longer legally married to his wife) was *Mafhūm al-nass: Dirāsah fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Understanding the [sacred] text: A study of the sciences of the Qur'an) (Beirut, 1990). Two interesting articles on Abu Zayd's methodology should be noted: Charles Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 1 (1996), and Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006). Mahmood deals with Abu Zayd among other liberal Islamic reformers.

[26] A detailed account of the case is given in Kilian Bälz, "Submitting Faith to Judicial Scrutiny Through the Family Trial: The 'Abu Zayd Case,'" *Die Welt des Islams,* New Series 37, no. 2 (1997). A more interesting account is provided in chap. 1 ("The Legalization of *Hisba* in the Case of Nasr Abu Zayd") of Hussein Agrama's PhD dissertation *Law Courts and Fatwa Councils in Modern Egypt: An Ethnography of Islamic Legal Practice,* The Johns Hopkins University, 2005. Extended extracts from the judgments in the court of first instance, the court of appeals, and the court of cassation, are given (in French translation) in "Jurisprudence Abu Zayd," *Egypte/Monde Arabe,* no. 34 (1998). The original Arabic judgments are contained in Muhammad Salim al-'Awwa, *al-haq fi al-ta'bīr* (The right to free speech), (Cairo, 1998).

[27] Al-'Awwa, *al-haq fi al-ta'bīr*, p. 23. See also Ahmad Rashad Tahun, *Hurriyat al-*

ʿaqīda fi-shsharīʿa al-islāmiyya (Cairo, 1998), who is more concerned with the political issues—especially with the unity of the *umma*—than al-ʿAwwa is.

28 In a recent article Baber Johansen has traced Ibn Taymiyya's position on the question of coerced confession. "Whereas the torture of witnesses played an important role in Roman law and in late medieval judicial practice of Europe," Johansen observes, "it is unknown in Muslim legal doctrine." But Ibn Taymiyya took an unusually political view of the law's role, and in so doing advocated the legal admissibility of coerced evidence. See "Signs as Evidence: The Doctrine of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (D. 1351) on Proof," *Islamic Law and Society* 9, no. 2 (2002): citation on p. 171.

29 In "What Is Enlightenment" Kant makes what may appear to be a similar distinction when he speaks about "public" and "private" reason. The latter, however, depends on the concept of the state in relation to which an arena for the conduct of public debate is circumscribed. Al-ʿAwwa has no such argument. His concern is simply with the representability of personal belief as an inner condition.

30 "It is to be noted that according to the definition (1) blasphemy is set down as a word, for ordinarily it is expressed in speech, though it may be committed in thought or in act. Being primarily a sin of the tongue, it will be seen to be opposed directly to the religious act of praising God. (2) It is said to be against God, though this may be only mediately, as when the contumelious word is spoken of the saints or of sacred things, because of the relationship they sustain to God and His service"; *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1907), 2:595.

31 Al-ʿAwwa, *al-haq fi al-taʿbīr*, p.13.

32 Al-Shaykh ʿUthman Safi, *ʿAla Hāmish "Naqd al-fikr ad-dīnī"* (A Footnote to "The Critique of Religious Thought") (Beirut, 1970), p. 87.

33 Bälz, "Submitting Faith," p. 143.

34 Johansen, "Signs as Evidence."

35 See the excellent ethnographic study by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, 2005).

36 Ibid., pp. 12–13.

37 This is not unlike the premodern meaning of the word "belief" in English and its equivalents in other European languages. See chap. 6 of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Oxford, 1998), for an interesting etymology of the word.

38 There has been considerable disagreement in modern Islamic history over the criteria for determining apostasy, as well as whether, and if so how, it should be punished. Thus one of the medieval collections of *hadith*, by Bukhari, records a statement by the Prophet Muhammad that apostates must be killed; but another canonical collection, that by Muslim, declares

this statement to be inauthentic. The debate has continued in modern times.

39 See the sensitive analysis in Dorothea Weltecke, "Beyond Religion: On the Lack of Belief During the Central and Late Middle Ages," in *Religion and Its Other: Secular and Sacral Concepts and Practices in Interaction*, ed. Jörg Feuchter, Michi Knecht, and Heike Bock (Chicago, 2008).

40 A typical sentence: *wa-l-fitnatu ashaddu min al-qatli* (2:191), "persecution is worse than killing."

41 Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1989).

42 "Here I stand: I can do no other," the words attributed to Luther, were probably never uttered, although they express very well the sentiment of his actual statement at the Diet of Worms. See O. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 56. At any rate, what he said on that famous occasion would have to be described as sincere but inauthentic. This doesn't seem right, however.

43 Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Boston, 1983), p. 26.

44 Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique," trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in James Schmidt, ed., *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley, 1996).

45 See Reinhart Koselleck, *Crisis and Critique* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), p. 103 n. 15. My colleague John Wallach informs me: "The verb is *krino*, which could signify 'to separate, to discern, to judge.' Related nouns are *krisis* (turning point—potentially between life and death) and *kriterion*, i.e., means for judging, as well as the designation for a 'judge.' Courts were known as *Dikasteriai*, places where judgments of justice were laid down. Judges on Greek juries were called *dikastai*. The Greek goddess of Justice was Dike. Dike derives from the verb *dikazo*, which signified 'to judge, to decide, to establish as a penalty or judgment.' Some relate it to the verb *deiknumi*, which signifies 'to show, make manifest, prove,' etc. There was no verb equivalent of what English speakers have recently made into a verb (from its origins as a noun), viz. 'critique'"; personal communication. A useful account of the history of the term is available in the entries "Krisis" and "Kritik" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart, 1972–).

46 See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles, 2001), pp. 119–33.

47 See Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism*, revised and expanded ed. (New York, 2003), esp. chap. 18.

48 Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994).

49 Later, however, the Communist Party would take up the practice of auto-

critique. The most moving example of this that I know in literature is Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (London, 1940).

[50] Karl Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1959) is the famous statement of his falsification theory. His *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1957) was an influential critique directed at the scientific claims of Marxian historicism.

[51] See note 5.

[52] A mere two weeks before the publication of the cartoons, the Danish newspaper *Politiken* printed an article titled "A profound fear of criticizing Islam," which suggests that white majorities in Europe felt beleaguered by the presence of Muslim minorities. See Randall Hansen, "The Danish Cartoon Controversy: A Defence of Liberal Freedom," *International Migration* 44, no. 5 (2006): p. 8.