

# On Blasphemy

Maajid Nawaz

CENTRE:FORUM

Galileo is “vehemently suspect by this Holy office of heresy, that is, of having believed and held the doctrine (which is false and contrary to the Holy and Divine Scriptures) that the sun is the centre of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, and that the earth does move, and is not the centre of the world...”

**Sentencing at the Inquisition of Galileo,  
22 June 1633**

Every philosopher, prophet, scientist and great political and social reformer of their day has started as a heretic. Mohammad blasphemed against the polytheist social order of Mecca, Jesus against the monotheistic legalese of the Temple, and Moses before them against the idols of the Children of Israel. The right to heresy, to blasphemy, and to speak against prevalent dogma is as sacred and divine as any act of prayer. If our hard earned liberty, our desire to be irreverent of the old and to question the new, can be reduced to one, basic and indispensable right: it must be the right to free speech. Our freedom to speak represents our freedom to think, our freedom to think our ability to create, innovate and progress. You cannot kill an idea, but you can certainly kill a person for expressing it. For if liberty means anything at all, it is the right to express oneself without being killed for it.

The importance of internalised liberalism in contemporary British society has come to represent a cornerstone of modern Liberal Democrat thinking.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to extend that notion by arguing that liberalism is an idea that should be actively, universally

and externally asserted, among, between and across communities, cultures and borders. A certain neo-orientalism has crept upon us, partly in reaction to the failed militarism of the neo-conservative years, but mainly attributable to historical self-critical attitudes towards the British Empire. This neo-orientalism interprets liberalism as a Western construct ill-fitting to non-Western cultures. Struggling, dissenting liberals within minority community contexts find that they have no greater enemy than these neo-orientalists who lend credence to the idea that they are somehow an inauthentic expression of their ‘native’ culture. This view, while embracing moral relativity, reduces other cultures to lazy, romanticised and static clichés. Far worse, it ends up not just tolerating but actively promoting illiberal practices in the name of assumed cultural authenticity, even where such promoted practices are in fact ahistoric, inauthentic neo-fundamentalisms.

There is a great betrayal of minorities-within-minorities afoot. The price of this betrayal in modern Britain is monocultural ghettos that stifle minority opportunities by acquiescing to the silencing of innovative voices, in the name of this assumed cultural authenticity. Only by the universal reassertion of free

<sup>1</sup> David Laws and Paul Marshall (eds), ‘The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism’, London, 2004

**This pamphlet forms the first in a series of papers addressing contemporary issues in public policy from a liberal perspective. Marking the 10th anniversary of the publication of the Orange Book, a selection of these papers will be published collectively in a forthcoming special edition publication, The Challenges Facing Contemporary Liberalism: 2015 -2025.**

speech will those silent voices stand any chance of being heard. Free speech is not a 'Western' ideal but a human one.

### Globalisation and identity

Rapid globalisation has helped to erode national identity. Encouraged by innovations in international travel and communications, we have witnessed instead the rise of lateral transnational identities that reach across borders, rather than within them, to find affinity. Consequently, previously isolated pockets of parochialisms are connecting, providing a sense of belonging to global causes beyond geographical boundaries.

A common fear is that living in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies leads to the disintegration of one's own culture. Some, especially those from minority communities, feel the need to protect themselves against this threat by ardently clinging on to, and exaggerating, a narrow form of their ethnic or religious identity. 'Cultural differences' are therefore emphasised and ring-fenced more than they otherwise would be.

Of course it is possible to do this in a healthy way, and many do. But some modern cultural insecurities have warped to form a broad anti-establishment sentiment in Britain. Victimhood is used as means to create a sense of besiegement, leading to highly exclusionary identity formations. The rise of identity politics and reactionary political or religious ideological trends across Europe can be said to be inspired by this fear of losing one's identity, and sense of belonging, via globalisation.

It is usually the case that those who are most passionately against the status quo are the most active at proselytising, and so it has come to pass that it is the political extremes - Far Right, Anarchist and Islamist - who have best exploited this ability to build exclusionary, transnational identities. Here, globalisation can be said to have 'sharpened the differences and increased cultural confrontations'<sup>2</sup> in Europe rather than creating integrated, multicultural melting pots.

### Cultural relativity

In response to tension created by the rise in reactionary political trends, liberal society has understandably been inclined to reduce the risk of conflict. Words, images and actions that could be deemed offensive by certain sections of a community, especially a religious community, are subsequently avoided by us in apprehension, worried such actions may create an unwanted reaction. In essence, unhealthy taboos that ideally need to be broken are simply further entrenched. In some cases these taboos are actively and tragically enforced in the

guise of defending diversity.

In what would now be considered a preposterous - and thankfully illegal - measure, in 1993 the London Borough of Brent proposed a motion to make Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) legal. The motion called for FGM to be classed as a "right specifically for African families who want to carry on their tradition whilst living in this country". Ann John, a local Brent councillor at the time, successfully opposed this motion and tabled her own amendment in which she called FGM "barbaric" and said it was "no more a valid cultural tradition than is cannibalism". But this was the 1990s, the decade of unhinged state-sponsored monocultural ghettoisation, unfortunately named multiculturalism. Subsequently, for her heresy Ann suffered a tirade of abuse and threats. She was called a "colonialist missionary" who "thinks she knows what is best for Africans" and even threatened with mutilation herself. It took until 2014 for Brent Council to finally teach FGM prevention in all its schools. Yet according to statistics cited by the government's Department for International Development (DfID), over 20,000 girls under the age of 15 are still at risk of FGM in the UK every year.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Britain is yet to witness one successful conviction for this reprehensible practice. Ann John has an explanation for this, interviewed in 2014 she "believes her treatment scared off other people from speaking out against FGM for years out of a fear of being called racist".<sup>4</sup>

As with homophobia, the cultural war against FGM is slowly being won in Britain. But the fact that many still feel unable to make negative judgements about other practices found in alternative cultures, and our own, is deeply problematic. We liberals will be rightly judged by the extent of our concern for the weakest among us. In today's Britain, the weakest among us are often assumed to be minority communities. In fact, the weakest are those minorities-within-minorities for whom the legal right to exit from their communities' constraints amounts to nothing before the enforcement of cultural and religious shaming. Those most vulnerable would include dissenting religious sects, feminists, LGBT and apostates, all of whom may question the prevailing dogma within their group identity. Liberalism in this instance is duty bound to unhesitatingly support the dissenting individual over the group, the heretic over the orthodox, innovation over stagnation and free speech over offence. Or, as John Maynard Keynes

3 Improving the Lives of Girls and Women in the World's Poorest Countries, DfID, available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-lives-of-girls-and-women-in-the-worlds-poorest-countries/supporting-pages/helping-to-end-female-genital-mutilation-for-girls-and-women-in-africa>

4 Evening Standard, 'Ann John: I was branded a colonialist for fighting against 'barbaric' FGM', Anna Davis, 28 March 2014, available from: <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/ann-john-i-was-branded-a-colonialist-for-fighting-against-barbaric-fgm-9220777.html>

2 Erika Harris, *Nationalism: Theories and Cases*, Edinburgh, 2009

would say, to “appear unorthodox, troublesome, dangerous, disobedient to them that begat us”.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, what is often the case is that prevailing neo-orientalist thinking would either remain silent, or criticise those who do seek to challenge dogma, for ‘causing offence’. An assumption is made here about what ‘authenticity’ in a given culture is. Subsequent actions and advice, policy or otherwise, are patronisingly given on the basis of this assumption. Confirmation bias leads to seeking reaffirmation for this assumption from the very ‘community leaders’ who stand most to gain by reaffirming it. Few stop to ask why it is assumed that Britain’s three million Muslims, the vast majority of whom are not religious, would wish to engage the public through Citizen Khan<sup>6</sup> like conservative figures.<sup>7</sup> Not only is this assumption lazy, but it suggests that each culture is effectively a homogenous, static group; the members of which think the same way and would all be equally offended by the same thing, none of whom can speak as individuals, but like native savages would require ‘chiefs’ to speak on their collective behalf. If seeking unity in politics is fascism, then seeking unity in religion is theocracy. Liberalism cherishes internal diversity in both.

When such cultural relativity becomes the norm, more progressive and liberal elements within minority religious communities or cultural groups in particular are betrayed, only then to be besieged by all sides. Through this reductionist quest for cultural ‘authenticity’, anything deemed Western is incrementally excluded by our neo-orientalists as inauthentic, until only the most conservative, dogmatic and regressive voices remain - which are, ironically, entirely a product of modernity in themselves. Alas, this search for authenticity is a battle that only fundamentalists and fascists can win. Bigotry is not merely generalising a culture, religion or race for hate. Those who generalise a culture, religion or race in order to display a patronising love, more befitting to a pet, must also be considered bigots. And only the most regressive forces stand to gain by exaggerating their culture, religion or race, either in defiance or compliance to bigots. Liberalism must seek out the individual, not the stereotype. Because such reductionist approaches are nothing but an outdated superiority complex that should have died along with the Empire.<sup>8</sup> Because to deem the ‘poor natives’ as being too primitive to grasp liberalism, and to subsequently hold them to and judge them by a lower standard, is a poverty of expectation.

5 John Maynard Keynes, ‘Am I a Liberal?’, Liberal Summer School, August 1 1925

6 Citizen Khan, BBC One sitcom, written and played by Adil Ray [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03c8nd8](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03c8nd8)

7 See Amartya Sen: ‘Identity and Violence’ Allen Lane, London 2006

8 For further reading see Edward W. Said, ‘Orientalism’, 1978

Let us take the example of the Law Society of England and Wales. In early 2014, the Law Society, a necessarily secular institution, published a practice note advising solicitors on how to draft wills in accordance with “Sharia Law”; except there is no single version of Sharia, and in Arabic, Sharia is a noun, not an adjective to describe the noun ‘law’. These guidelines included assertions that “Sharia Law” endorses the disinheritance of apostates and adopted children, and discriminates against women. It is true that English Common Law allows for inheritance to be decided in any way that pleases the testator. The concern here however is why the Law Society felt entitled not only to intervene in an intra-religious debate about the nature and applicability of Islam today, but that when doing so it picked the most regressive form of medievalism and promoted it as ‘authentic’ Islam,<sup>9</sup> thus betraying, and further isolating, liberal reforming Muslims from the outset.<sup>10</sup>

### Freedom of speech

The publication of cartoons in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten are a case in point. It was only when the press started approaching certain ‘community leaders’ that an angry response became apparent, especially since only religious imams were approached.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, I recently tweeted an innocuous stick figure, not drawn by me, of an image called ‘Mo’ saying “Hi” to an image called ‘Jesus’. The image called ‘Jesus’ said in reply, “How ya doin?”. I did so because, as a Muslim, I felt it was necessary to make the point that I was not offended by a benign cartoon in light of media portrayals of all Muslims as overly-sensitive. I did so in the aftermath of a live TV debate on the subject. Ironically, and while I vehemently disagree with the veil, my intervention came in the context of attempting to defend the rights of a veiled Muslim woman who had just been told that her veil ‘offends’ people. After asserting her own right to wear what she likes, this lady retorted to a man next to her that he however could not wear his tee-shirt with the above described stick figure labelled ‘Mo’, because it offends her. My reply was that people are free to take offence at how I dress, but they are not free to insist that I dress in a way that does not offend them. This principle applies to all, fairly. I then retweeted that I was not offended by this stick figure labelled ‘Mo’. Blasphemy is in the

9 See the Law Society, Sharia succession rules, 13th March 2014 and a response by the Lawyers Secular Society (LSS) ‘The Law Society should stay out of the theology business’, available from: [lawyerssecularsociety.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/the-law-society-should-stay-out-of-the-theology-business/](http://lawyerssecularsociety.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/the-law-society-should-stay-out-of-the-theology-business/)

10 Only after some laudable campaigning, not least from the Lawyer’s Secular Society and One Law for All, among others, did the Law Society eventually - and quietly - drop this practice note.

11 See Kenan Malik’s Enemies of free speech, Index on Censorship, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2012.

eye of the beholder. I was subsequently inundated with a torrent of abuse and violent threats by some vocal but reactionary Muslims. More telling was the chastisement by many non-Muslim neo-orientalists who accused me of being insensitive to ‘Muslim feelings’, as if I myself was not one of these Muslims with some ‘feelings’ I needed to express.

And then came the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris.

Taking the easy route by condemning the radical for causing unnecessary trouble is overwhelmingly tempting, and incredibly lazy. Liberals would instinctively see the birth pangs of progress through such heresy. Cultural relativism has created an absurd situation whereby minorities-within-minorities are no longer free to move intra-cultural debates forward. I recall once as a child that a passerby approached a gay couple on the street and told them not to hold hands in public, asking the gay couple “are you deliberately trying to offend us?” I rest my case.

### The inconvenient minority

And so that great lynchpin of liberty, freedom of speech, as defined by Article 19 of the UDHR,<sup>12</sup> is being eroded by exclusionary group identities. These groups struggle to compete over who is more offended, and who is more entitled. Civil society is now expected to self-censor and the term ‘tolerance’, as explained by Flemming Rose, is ‘no longer about the ability to tolerate things for which we do not care, but more about the ability to keep quiet and refrain from saying things that others may not care to hear’.<sup>13</sup>

This brings me to the term ‘Islamophobia’, often deployed - even against other Muslims - as a shield against any criticism, and as a muzzle on free speech. If heresy is to be celebrated, it follows that no idea, no matter how ‘deeply held’, is given special status. For there will always be an equally ‘deeply held’ belief in opposition to it. Hatred motivated specifically to target Muslims, people like me, must be condemned. But to confuse this hatred with satirising, questioning, researching, reforming, contextualising or historicising Islam, or any other faith or dogma, is as good as returning to Galileo’s Inquisition. It follows, therefore, that any liberal naturally concerned with a fair society must be the first to openly defend against the erosion of free speech, especially when deceptively done in the name of minority rights.

Amidst a wave of self-doubt, blasphemy laws, though formally abolished in the UK, are effectively being revived by a cultural climate that purports to be liberal yet upholds illiberalism. Ultimately, restrictions on freedom of speech achieve only one thing - the domination of regressive ideals. Reactionaries are the first to take offence, and the first to demand punitive action against those who they deem offensive. In this way we actively empower illiberal dogma in the name of ‘diversity’, while abandoning vulnerable activists within minorities in the name of ‘respect for difference’.

Neo-orientalist reticence is in part driven by genuine concern of a racist backlash against minority communities by right wing bigots. Britain has become a place where white racists and Christian fundamentalists ally to the Right on domestic issues, while Islamists and Muslim fundamentalists ally to the Left on foreign policy issues. Both groups are able to co-opt the political rhetoric of each political wing to fuel their narrative of victimhood. Both are able to intimidate the ‘other’. Though this fear of racism is genuine - I have personally had to endure being violently targeted by racists over a prolonged period - ignoring Islamist extremism in the name of respect for difference will only fuel racism more by feeding the Far Right’s victimhood narrative. Both extremes are in perfect symbiosis, feeding off each other to justify their respective grievances. But the difference between fairness and tribalism is the difference between choosing principles and choosing sides. Only a liberal torch can consistently shine through the fog of Far Right and Islamist extremisms and assert itself with any level of consistency.

George Orwell said, “The point is that the relative freedom which we enjoy depends on public opinion. The law is no protection. Governments make laws, but whether they are carried out, and how the police behave, depends on the general temper in the country. If large numbers of people are interested in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech, even if the law forbids it; if public opinion is sluggish, inconvenient minorities will be persecuted, even if laws exist to protect them...” To Orwell’s admirable concern for inconvenient minorities, I would only add one idea: the cost of betraying people’s right to heresy is that inconvenient minorities-within-minorities are, in fact, the very first to be persecuted.

**Maajid Nawaz is author of his autobiographical story Radical, Chairman of the counter-extremism organisation Quilliam, and a Liberal Democrat Parliamentary candidate for London’s Hampstead and Kilburn.**

The author would like to thank Hannah Larn and Ghaffar Hussain for their help

Maajid Nawaz can be contacted on Twitter via @MaajidNawaz

12 Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’.

13 Flemming Rose, cultural editor of the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, in Kenan Malik’s essay Enemies of free speech, Index on Censorship, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2012.