

MOHAMMED BAKHTI

University of Oujda, Morocco

mbakhti51@hotmail.com

RELIGION: A STUMBLING BLOCK OR AN INCENTIVE TO INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

A bridge and understanding between different cultures are of paramount significance for coexistence, security and world peace. Religion, which is an important and inseparable part of culture, can play a very crucial role in promoting or wreaking havoc with intercultural dialogue. The world has never seen a culture without religion. Religion is one of the fundamental elements of each culture. It may have stronger or less visible roles but it is always there. Religious institutions and religious leaders have always played very important roles in all societies. The priest, the rabbi or the imam can incite religious segregation and bigotry, and declare “holy war” against peoples who worship at different shrines. Influential religious people can easily manipulate and exploit their followers, arouse religious fanaticism, encourage the use of violent means of terrorism to intimidate and conquer those who are different and do not concur with them.

Religion is part and parcel of the cultural heritage. It always shapes culture and is shaped by it. There is no such thing as ‘pure’ religion or ‘pure’ culture. Nobody lives outside a cultural context. Every person is part of the culture of the community to which he belongs. Thus, religion, which cannot be severed from culture, determines the spontaneous and subconscious reactions of the people and their interpretation of reality. As a perennial issue, it has always played a key role in moulding the individual’s life and shaping the relations between individuals, ethnic groups and nations. The Right Reverend Richard Harries, The Bishop of Oxford, in his article *A Dialogue of Religions*, argues

that people have very strong feelings about their religion. By definition, for anyone who truly believes, it is the most important factor in their life, shaping their whole outlook. Moreover, if the religion in which they believe claims to reveal absolute truth, then the intensity of conviction will be even further heightened.¹

¹ *The Diplomat*, vol. 2 (London: June 1996), p. 26.

Accordingly, religion comes into play in the shaping of individual, national or international relations. People of religion have always held themselves in readiness to die or sacrifice everything in order to defend their religion or preserve their religious identity. Hence many of the fiercest, most atrocious and enduring disputes, which have affected and shaped human history, have been among the peoples of the main revealed religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The adherents of each of these faiths think themselves the chosen people. Akbar S. Ahmed, in *Post Modernism and Islam*, in an attempt to put his finger on some of the main reasons at the root of religious antagonism, states:

More bitter conflicts centre on doctrinal matters: the Christians blame the Jews for Jesus' death - the eponymous Judas, in popular Christian culture, becomes the synonym for a treacherous friend, a betrayer; the mnemonic association, Judas and Jew, underscores the point. Christians also make scathing attacks on the Prophet and the Qur'an. Muslims, in turn, believe they possess the final revelation, question the very concept of the Trinity in Christianity and swear of the Oneness of God. Meanwhile, the Jews dismiss the other two religions as upstarts, declaring themselves the Chosen Ones, the exclusive of God. This is what anthropologists call agnatic rivalry, the intense love-hate relationship between a father's brothers' sons.²

Thus, religion is an important dimension of a national or regional culture. Any policy in favour of intercultural dialogue cannot, however, be developed without a broader approach that takes due account of religions and beliefs as social and historical realities.

The development of inter-cultural dialogue could be marred by numerous obstacles: ignorance, misunderstanding, isolationism, stereotyping, prejudice, fear, and social or economic problems. All these problems and obstacles could be easily surmounted. However, religious bigotry, segregation, and extremism, as perennial issues, have proved to be more than ever before, insurmountable obstacles that do hinder intranational and international relations, and spoil social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Religious hate crimes and slaughters, as the consequence of religious differences, strong bigotry and prejudice, have actually interspersed human history. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the numerous campaigns to proselytise, and religious persecutions have shed a lot of blood and caused the massacre of myriads of innocent people.

For instance, the Crusades, or the 'Holy Wars' as the Christians used to call them, had a very shattering and long lasting effect on the Muslim-Christian relations. The Christians decided to free the birth place of Christ, the city

² Ahmed Akbar S., *Postmodernism and Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 60.

of Jerusalem, sacred to the three main faiths (Abrahamic religions), and which had been captured by Muslim armies by the middle of the seventh century, so they launched many crusades against the Muslims. The Crusades are tricky from the point of view of the historian. The exact number of Crusades is not known. Most historians believe that there were eight "official" crusades. Some historians count as many as 23, including the Children's crusade and the Peasant's Crusade. It is of interest to dwell, though very briefly, on these two particular crusades. Shortly before the official launch of the First Crusade (1096), a rag-tag army of peasants, blinded by religious sectarianism and bigotry and led by a French monk, began their march to Jerusalem. Apart from some very few Knights, most of the participants were women, children and clerics. All of them were slaughtered by the Turks. Almost a century later, again, religious fanaticism and hatred concurred to bring about one of the most lamentable carnages of beguiled innocent boys and girls. In the summer of 1212, thousands of children, mostly from France and Germany, ventured to recapture Jerusalem. It was the Children's Crusade. The adventure was an unmitigated disaster. Most of the children died while crossing the Alps. Some of the boys who survived were captured and sold as slaves while most of the surviving girls ended up in Roman brothels.

Concerning the official crusades, as Aziz S. Atya, Norman Daniel and John L. Esposito³, among others, have noted, the Crusaders victory was short lived and that the Crusades, which started tragically for Muslims, ended in a total disaster for Christians. Muslims' retaliations were bloodier and more violent. They had not only reconquered Jerusalem but also launched an unremitting counter-Crusade against all Christendom. Thus, the shedding of more blood and the slaughtering of more innocent human beings, irrespective of age and sex, continued. Hostilities, grudge and revenge intensified, and both Christians and Muslims have since then been on the watch to take advantage of one another's momentary weaknesses.

The Christians' discomfiture in the face of Islam, indeed, had never fallen in oblivion and the crusades, both as idea and as action, continued to haunt and worry Christian Europe during the succeeding centuries. For instance, the echoes of the calls to crusade loomed large in the minds of the Elizabethans as King Henry the Fourth's speech, in Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*, shows:

³ See accounts of the repeated military expeditions by Christendom to recapture Jerusalem and the holy land from Islam, and which resulted in bloody clashes between Christians and Muslims that caused great death and destruction, discomfiture of the Christian armies, and finally a long counter-attack that would lead Muslims to the heart of Europe in Atiya Aziz S., *Crusade, Commerce and Culture* (Oxford: University Press, 1961); Daniel Norman, *Islam and The West, the making of an image* (Edinburgh: Univercity Press, 1960); and John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or reality* (Oxford: Universty Press, 1995).

Therefore, friends,
 As far as to the sepulcher of Christ –
 Whose soldier now, under whose blessed cross
 We are impressed and engag'd to fight –
 Forthwith a power of English shall we levy,
 Whose arms were molded in their mother's womb
 To chase these pagans in those holy fields
 Over whose acres walk'd those blessed feet
 With fourteen hundred years ago were nail'd
 For our advantage on the bitter cross.
 (I.i.18 – 27)⁴

There can be little doubt that Islam was a very serious problem for Christianity from the time it first appeared. It presented a religious and intellectual challenge to Christianity. The long tumultuous years of the crusades and Strong religious bigotry have sowed deep hatred in the hearts of the people of the three main faiths. The embers of grudge and revenge harboured by Christians against Muslims have never died.

When the First World War broke, the Turks, who allied with the Germans against the English and the French, were still overlords in the Arab world. In 1916 the Arabs decided to free themselves from the yoke of the Turkish Empire. British military leadership quickly realized that the Arab rebellion would occupy large numbers of Turkish troops needed elsewhere and aid their war with Germany, Turkey's ally. The Arabs who were led to think that the British were sincere in their desire to free the Arab people from the Turkish domination welcomed the aid, cooperation and leadership of the British Colonel T.E. Lawrence. Unfortunately for the Arabs, the British were actuated entirely by the politics of empire, not the aspirations of the Arab people. Lawrence's mission, to his disappointment, was to serve the European imperialism. After the defeat of the Ottomans and the capture of Damascus by the Arab and English armies, the French forces led by General Henri Gouraud, whose country was given a mandate (August 1920) over Syria by the League of Nations, moved to Damascus to overthrow the newly proclaimed nationalist Arab government. After having, quickly and easily, crushed the Syrian opposition, the general proceeded immediately to the place where the legendary Muslim hero Salah al-dine al-Ayoubi (who defeated the Crusaders and liberated Jerusalem in the mid-12th century) was buried, kicked his tomb and announced gloatingly: "Nous revoilà, Saladin!"⁵

Almost a century after the profanities and the desecration of Salah al-dine al-Ayoubi's tomb by the French General, the American president George Bush,

⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV* (Part I), ed. Humphreys A. R. (London: Methuen, 1960).

⁵ Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p. 5.

again, twisted the knife in the Muslims' wound. He publicly declared another Christian Crusade. 'Crusade' is a word that evokes an appalling deadly episode in the history of Muslims in particular and the history of mankind in general. George Bush invaded two Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, and was preparing to attack a third one, Iran.

The world has become rife with hostilities, religious hatred, conflicts and violence. Religious intolerance and prejudice are present to an alarming degree, engendering bitter vitriolic discourses not much different from the very early Medieval discourse that sought to vilify the prophet Muhammad and distort his religion. Islam was anathematised, its values denied and subjected to very ridiculous distortions. All sorts of arguments, caricatures, monstrosities and vices were put forward to disparage and vilify the prophet Muhammad. Rana Kabbani wrote:

The projection of evil onto a faraway culture was also a significant aspect of medieval Europe's bulwark of bigotry. And since it had a portentous opponent in the Islamic state, it fashioned a polemic to check whatever influence such a rival state might have. This polemic was highly charged with hostility, and notable for fanaticism that engendered it. Islam was seen as the negation of Christianity; Muhammad as an impostor, an evil sensualist, an antichrist in alliance with the devil.⁶

The images produced in the Medieval literature tell of a man who was blood-thirsty, a heretic, a miscreant, and a rank sensualist among other very negative references and denigrating designations. They did everything to ridicule him and show his character to be completely incompatible with revelation.

The old negative attitudes, prejudices, stereotypes and hostilities, which have haunted the Christian mind for centuries and have been fuelled by new grievances, misunderstandings and sometimes extremely violent confrontations, have recently found expression in blasphemous films, novels and cartoons. In 2004, for instance, Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh produced a film, *Submission*, about Islamic culture and domestic violence in Islam. The ten-minute film tells the story of a Muslim woman who was raped by her own uncle and forced to marry an abusive husband. It was not the exposure of the alleged mistreatment of Muslim women, which outraged Muslims, but the profane and sacrilegious treatment of the Islamic scriptures. One of the film scenes shows a bullied Muslim woman whose see-through garments expose a body covered with Koranic verses and whip marks. More outrageous and offending were the twelve Islamophobic Danish caricatures, which show the Prophet Muhammad in a variety of blasphemous satirical situations. They include a picture of the prophet with a lit bomb-shaped turban on his head. Another caricature depicts the prophet standing on a cloud at the gates of heaven and trying to turn away a line of smouldering suicide bombers, saying "Stop. Stop. We have run out of Virgins!" The 12 cartoons stigmatize the

⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

prophet Muhammad as a heretic, a sensualist and a terrorist; and deride Islam as a religion of blood, tyranny, submission, sensuality, abuse and cruelty to women. What started as a local protest by some Danish and immigrant Muslims turned very quickly into a major international incident. Imams denounced the cartoons and Denmark from their pulpits; diplomatic sanctions were imposed against Denmark; many Arab ambassadors were recalled; Danish products were boycotted; many Western and Danish diplomatic missions were torched; death threats were made against the Danish cartoonist; and the Dutch film maker was shot and stabbed to death in the streets of Amsterdam in broad daylight.

In the same vein, on 21 August 2008, a thirty-two-year-old Egyptian woman, fell victim to the same morass of religious bigotry and hatred that killed the Danish cartoonist a few years earlier. A quarrel, which started in a public playground, over the use of a swing by the niece of the German Alex Wiens and the son of the Egyptian Marwa al-Sherbini, ended in the regional court of Dresden with the stabbing to death of the woman. She was killed during a hearing by the German against whom she had testified for previous xenophobic and Islamophobic insults. In the playground for children, Wiens had called al-Sherbini, who was wearing an Islamic headscarf, "Islamist", "terrorist" and other abusive and derogatory epithets.

Indeed the turn of the twenty first century has been characterized by a series of Islamophobic provocations which aroused strong indignation and sometimes very violent retaliation from extremist and moderate Muslims alike. It seems that such situation is not favourable to a fruitful dialogue among the followers of the three monotheistic religions. Another event which fuelled the already very tumultuous relations between Christians and Muslims was the issue of the scarf. In March 2004, the French parliament passed a law forbidding the wearing of conspicuous religious attire, items and symbols in public schools. The controversy over Islamic women's garb and scarf has rocked France since 1989. From 1994 to 2003, more than one hundred female students have been suspended or expelled from schools for refusing to remove the scarf in class. While the French government insisted on the banning of any religious sign showing the student's religious affiliation in order to maintain the tradition of secularism in the classroom, Muslims across the world denounced the discriminatory nature of the newly enacted law. They saw the French decision as a violation of freedom of practicing their religion and believed that the purpose of the law was to exclude Muslim female students wearing the headscarf. They also argued that even if it was passed in the guise of a general law to be applied to all religions, its target was neither the Jews' skullcaps nor the Sikhs' turbans. Its instated but clear purpose was to prohibit female Muslim students from wearing the Islamic headscarf, which will likely alienate and drive Muslims even further away from the rest of the country.

However, by enacting this law, France successfully killed two birds with one stone. First, the new law totally engrossed the Arab and Muslim nations at a time when the tension between Muslims and the west heightened. The war in Iraq, the massacres in Palestine and the complicity of Europe in the invasion of some Muslim countries or toppling their governments – as they refused to kowtow to the American wishes – awoke the bitterest passions in the Muslim communities in Europe and the Muslim nation as a whole. On the other hand, the law protects the Jewish children as it prevents them from wearing their skullcaps, a sign of their religious affiliation. In France, Jewish students were being harassed but not only by Muslim pupils. Christians, too, bullied them and insulted them as “dirty Jew”. The fact that anti-Semitic and racist insults were becoming a feature of everyday life worried Israel and the Jewish communities in Europe. They accused the French authorities of turning a blind eye to the rising anti-Semitism echoing the dark days of the Vichy government and its collaboration with the Germans. Immediately the education minister declared that regional cells would be set up to monitor and stamp out anti-Semitic acts by schoolchildren. It seems that the French government now tries to atone for and redress the abuses and wrongs visited on the Jewish children, the grandparents of the bullied children school, by Vichy government, which

far from attempting to save the children of the foreign Jews whom they delivered to the Germans, French authorities offered them, too, for deportation. Vichy⁷ suggested that children be sent along with the adults even before the Nazis were ready to accept them.⁸

Ironically enough, in the past the religious minorities, Jews in particular, were forced to wear badges or some distinctive dress which showed their religious affiliation. At most times and in most places, Jewish life was not comfortable at all. To humiliate the Jew, to degrade him, to remind him of his inferiority, and to differentiate him from Christians, was translated into the imposition of distinctive Jewish dress on him. He was “compelled to wear some distinctive emblem, a certain style of hat, cloak, veil, or footgear.”⁹ A Jew, no matter how prosperous, must not wear sumptuous clothes as “position in society was a matter of birth, and status could easily be read from what one was allowed – or required – to wear”¹⁰. The Christians made of the Jew the most

⁷ Southern France, which was not occupied by the Germans, was governed by the Vichy regime which wilfully cooperated with the Germans in the deportation of thousands of Jews from France to internment camps or killing centres.

⁸ Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1981), p. 263.

⁹ Ruth Gay, *The Jews of Germany: A historical Portrait* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

diabolical bogey and set their ruthless anti-Jewish machine crushing a whole people, who were helpless, trying them “for a medley of mythic crimes: poisoning wells, killing children for their blood, crucifying victims, and eating them too.”¹¹ The Vichy government, too, blamed the Jews for the demise of the French Republic. In 1942, the French and the Germans started deporting Jews with French citizenship.

The very old anti-Jewish prejudices and hostilities still haunted the French mind. During the Vichy regime, the very negative terms used by Xavier Vallat, the first commissioner-general for Jewish affairs, and his successor Louis Darquier¹² to describe Jews are not much different from those applied to Jewish children nowadays. Epithets like “dirty Jew”, “Alien Sharon” and “Jewish pen” have become now popular insults in public children schools.

However, the appellation “the Jew”, like the appellation “Muslim”, which has become synonymous with terrorism, does not evoke the sympathy of Christians. The term “the Jew” has become for Muslims, and Christians alike, a derogatory term charged with negative connotations, epitomizing an accumulation of prejudices and mythic crimes through a long history full of resentment and hostilities. The Jew’s past weighed heavily against him. The ghost of the blame for the murder of the Christ and the many attempts made on the life of the prophet Muhammad has never been laid down.

To crown all, the 9 September events only intensified the very old anti-Moslem prejudices and hostilities and widened the gap between the peoples of the main revealed faiths. They were denounced by mass media. Governments, across the globe, offered the American president support and solidarity. The attacks turned into a major international incident. Thus the wishful thinking of Bush’s administration materialized. The attacks, according to some conspiracy theorists¹³, were one of the great hoaxes of history. They were merely a masquerade to fool the American people and “manipulate” them “into sup-

¹¹ Kabbani Rana, *Europe’s Myths of Orient*, (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p. 5.

¹² In the spring of 1942, Vallat, while addressing students of public administration, referred to the Jews as “worms who are attracted by gangrenous wounds.” His successor Darquier depicted them as “that circumcised little pig” and the excrement of the ghetto.” See *Vichy France and the Jews*, p. 283.

¹³ Proponents of 9/11 conspiracy theories question the veracity of the official government story, claiming that what happened on Sept. 11 was merely a false flag operation orchestrated by the American president and his administration and blamed on Islamic extremists. They believe that the World Trade Centre towers collapsed because of “pre-positioned explosives” and not because of the crashing planes. For more information see Thierry Meyssan, *9/11; The Big Lie* (London: Carnot, 2002); David Griffin, *The New Pearl Harbor* (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2004); M. Arkin, “9/11 Truth? I Don’t Think So” *The Washington Post*; May 26, 2006; Kevin Barrett, *Truth Jihad My Epic Struggle Against the 9/11 Big Lie* (USA: Progressive Press, 2007); and Rowland Morgan, *Flight 93: What Really Happened on the Heroic 9/11 ‘Let’s Roll’ Flight* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2006).

porting policies at home and abroad"¹⁴; to provoke a pre-planned war against Iraq; to invade Afghanistan in order to depose the Taliban. Bin Laden, an American monstrous creation, was but a pawn in this sinister plot. He was previously used to drive the Russians away from Afghanistan and now is manipulated to slander and vilify Islam as a religion of terrorism, violence and intolerance. Moslems and Islam have become a substitute for the crumbling Russian empire and its communism. America needs an "Other" to project on, establish a Manichean dichotomy between Americans and Moslems, occupy and manipulate the minds of its people.

The aftermath of the attacks saw racial and religious tensions increase between Muslims and non Muslims not only in the United States but in Europe as well. There were reports of numerous incidents of harassment and religious hate crimes, attacks on mosques and other religious buildings. In some European and Moslem countries, Moslems responded violently. For instance, in the United Kingdom, a gang of Muslims murdered a teenager, Ross Parker, in a racist attack five days after the 9/11 attacks. In Moslem countries, many Christians and Jews were either harassed or stabbed to death. Islam and its disciples have become the sworn enemy of the Americans and by extension of the whole West.

Tolerance and respect for religious differences are in fact a prerequisite for any dialogue, be it cultural, economic or political. Religion can be a spoiler or a positive force in work for coexistence, tolerance and peace. In spite of the fact that Science and technology have broken down all barriers in communication and made the world a "global village", in which people of all walks meet, religious differences, which have never been surmounted, hinder all dialogues and mar social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Never in the history of mankind has there been a more desperate need for constructive and committed dialogue among people of different faiths and creeds. Religions have to make it a duty for their adherents to respect other faiths; to promote cultural cooperation, tolerance and a better knowledge and understanding of different religions and cultures; to increase the means of communication between the peoples of the different religions. Governments have to make every effort to stamp out the religious stereotypes, intolerance and hate; to dismantle the educational systems and sanction the mass media that mass-manufacture religious intolerance and hatred in order to consolidate human fellowship. A paramount need is for religions and cultures to bury their differences, to heal the hostilities and elaborate the positive attributes, which they share, such as love, compassion, equality, honesty, and the ideal of treating others as one wishes to be treated oneself and gloss over the rest.

¹⁴ *Deseret News*; Jan. 28, 2006.