CHAPTER 8

Contextualising Religious Pain

Saba Mahmood, Axel Honneth, and the Danish Cartoons

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Should religious beliefs and holy figures be publicly respected? Is there, at the very least, a negative duty not to hurt the religious feelings of believers? Or, should the religious accept that injurious speech is the price they must pay to live in a secular, liberal democracy? These questions have haunted and divided the Danish and European public sphere(s) ever since a national newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, provoked international protests and demonstrations in 2005 and 2006 with its publication of 12 cartoons—most of them portraying the prophet Muhammad in ways that many Muslims found deeply offensive.

This chapter discusses one of the more innovative academic studies of the Danish cartoon controversy: Saba Mahmood’s “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?”.¹ I draw on Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition to argue that Mahmood’s analysis is problematic because it ignores three kinds of ‘context’: psychological, social and normative. I further argue that Honneth’s theory provides us with the conceptual resources to contextualise Mahmood’s account in these three areas. At the same time, however, Mahmood touches on crucial cultural-religious practices and modes of ‘being in the world’ that Honneth tends to neglect.

In Section 1, I present Mahmood’s analysis of Muslim religious pain in terms of a ‘moral injury’: an emotional wound that occurs when a Muslim’s attachment to the prophet is disturbed. Mahmood characterises the Danish cartoon controversy as a paradigmatic example of the infliction of such pain on Muslims in secular Europe, and she calls for a ‘larger transformation’ of the ethical sensibilities of the non-Muslim majority population. In Section 2, I

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point to three problems in her account: (a) the lack of ‘psychological context’ refers to Mahmood’s portrayal of Muslim religious pain in a closed emotional world, which ignores the psychological affinities between Muslim pain and other types of human pain; (b) the lack of ‘social context’ refers to Mahmood’s failure to situate Muslim religious pain within particular social contexts and struggles for recognition; (c) the lack of ‘normative context’, finally, refers to my claim that moral criticism of Jyllands-Posten’s publication cannot rely on references to religious feelings alone, but must take into account the broader recognitive context in which it occurred.

In Sections 3–7, I argue that a Honnethian approach can contextualise Mahmood’s account on all three points. To lay the groundwork for my reading, I critically interpret Honneth’s concepts of ‘disesteem’, ‘respect’ and ‘solidarity’ to take more clearly into account the fact that human beings are culturally and religiously attached, and vulnerable as such. This fact is rightly stressed by Mahmood but downplayed by Honneth.

1 Saba Mahmood: Moral Injury as Muslim Pain

According to Mahmood, the reactions to the publication of the Danish cartoons among both Muslims and non-Muslims are exemplary of the standoff between religious and secular worldviews in European societies. However, Mahmood’s interpretation of this standoff is unique because she rejects the assumption that the cartoon controversy should be understood as a clash between the liberal value of freedom of speech, on one hand, and a religious taboo, on the other. For her, regardless of whether we defend or criticise the cartoons, it is misguided to believe that the controversy had anything to do with “a moral impasse between what the Muslim minority community considers being an act of blasphemy and the non-Muslim majority regards as an exercise of freedom of expression”. This description, she argues, is premised on “a [false] set of prior judgments about what kind of injury or offense the cartoons caused

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2 I will not separate principally between ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ in this chapter, though I tend to use ‘culture’ when speaking in general terms about group-based values and traditions and ‘religion’ when discussing the particular case of the Danish cartoons and Muslim reactions to it.
