



Cultural Relativism: a foe of Critical Thought



In response to the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) Who is the racist; you or I?

Maryam Namazie

This article is in direct response to the Canadian Council for Refugees' decision to ban me from their e-mail listserv because my writings, particularly 'Islam, Political Islam and Women's Rights in the Middle East' critiquing Islam and political Islam were alleged to 'denigrate a whole group of people' and 'could encourage a level of intolerance against all Muslim people'. The CCR asserts that my article

violates their anti-racist policy by 'not maintaining and/or promoting an environment free of discrimination and bias by its wholesale condemnation of Islam and Muslims and not demonstrating an acceptance of the equity of all faiths'. The below is yet another attempt to explain why a critique of Islam and the reactionary political movement linked to it not racist nor does it have anything to do with 'denigrating Muslims' but

is rather an important aspect of critical thought.

Introduction

Islam and political Islam (or Islamism), the reactionary extreme Right-wing movement which has organised itself under the banner of Islam, have been immensely catastrophic for the people of the Middle East and the world for the past several decades. This reality makes a critique of both not only an important aspect of

freedom of expression and critical thought in lieu of the Enlightenment's efforts to free human beings from the shackles of Middle Aged ignorance and the Church (now Mosque) but also a historical necessity. Such a critique has nothing to do with racism or 'denigrating Muslims'; there is a differentiation between Muslims and political Islam (as a contemporary political movement like many others), as well as between Muslims and Islam (which is the ideological aspect of this contemporary movement and a belief like many others).

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Refugees at Iraqi-Jordanian border at risk of being deported to Iraq

In their contacts with the International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR), refugees announced that 925 of the 1050 Iranians stranded in Al Karama at the Iraq-Jordanian border had initiated a sit-in as of Saturday 26 April to protest their inhuman conditions and to demand that

the Jordanian government open its borders to them. In subsequent contacts, and based on discussions between the refugees' representatives with the Jordanian authorities and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), they informed IFIR that the likelihood of

their being deported back to Iraq had greatly increased. Jordanian authorities had told them that since George Bush had officially announced the end of the war, the Jordanian government had no responsibility towards the refugees and that Iraq was now safe for them to return to. The refugees were told they had to return to Al Tash



camp, near Baghdad, where a majority had fled as a result

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Deeming this criticism racist is a form of racism itself whereby cultural relativism and multi-culturalism are used to justify or ignore violence and violations against countless human beings because they must be 'tolerated' and 'respected' as 'people's culture and religion', thereby promoting double standards of rights and norms for those born and living in the Middle East. Defence of this reaction vis-à-vis its outspoken opponents aims to silence critical thought and freedom of expression and speech and effectively aids political Islam in its repression, assassination and silencing of dissenters. It also paves the way for the Right in Western societies to make this critique from a virulently racist perspective, thereby increasing racism against Muslims on the one hand and providing a recruiting ground for the rise of political Islam among youth in the West lacking Left anti-racist alternatives on the other. Progress and advancement in our era is intrinsically linked to a free and radical critique of both Islam and political Islam from a humanist perspective; such

criticism is an urgent necessity of our time.

A critique of Islam and political Islam is not racism

My criticism of Islam and political Islam have been labelled 'racist', 'prejudiced', 'hate-ist', and 'discriminatory' by the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) or some members of its e-mail listserv. Clearly this is not the case. The European Commission defines racism and xenophobia as an 'aversion' to **individuals** based on 'race, colour, descent, religion or belief, national or ethnic origin'. According to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, racism is 'any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin'. While much of the categories in these definitions are social constructs and exclude the reality that racism is closely linked to power and class rule, they are nonetheless sufficient to reveal that the targets of racism and

discrimination are human beings not beliefs or ideas belonging to or attributed to them nor social or political movements associated with said beliefs.

Subsequently, the criticism of Islam and its political movement has nothing to do with having an 'aversion' towards or making a 'distinction', 'exclusion' or 'restriction' on Muslims as individuals or a group of people just as criticising Zionism or Judaism has nothing to do with racism against or the denigration of Jews or Israelis. Just as a criticism of fascism has nothing to do with having an 'aversion' towards Germans or Italians. Criticism of a religion, a belief, or an ideology isn't racist. It has nothing to do with racism whatsoever. Religion is a belief like all others and like all beliefs is open to criticism.

A critique must respect human beings not beliefs or movements

The CCR or some members of its e-mail listserv assert that a critique of Islam and political Islam 'fans anti-

Muslim sentiment' and 'intolerance towards Muslims'. This is like saying that a critique of Judaism and Zionism fans anti-Semitism or that a critique of Nazism incites and fans anti-German sentiment and intolerance towards Germans. Or that a criticism of nationalism incites anti-Kurdish or anti-Bosnian sentiment. Or that a criticism of the Christian-Right and Christianity fans intolerance towards Christians. Of course racism exists, including against Muslims, but this is because of the profitability of racism for the class system and not because of critical thought and freedom of expression! If it were so, then criticism of the asylum system would be responsible for the racism meted out against asylum seekers, or criticism of the Nation of Islam would be the cause of racism against Black Muslims and so on. There is obviously no connection between the two. Such assertions are primarily prescriptions to silence criticism and dissent.

Moreover, the notion that speaking out against Islam

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Mansoor Hekmat (1951-2002)

Mansoor Hekmat 1951-2002: With the bloody suppression of the revolution in Iran and the imposition of an ultra-reactionary life on the people, tens of thousands of human beings, alone and without organisation, fled the Islamic Republic of Iran in search of security and tranquillity. Organising this vast human mass around the most modern and humane advances of humanity, unconditionally defending their right to asylum; placing them alongside the humanitarian and working class struggle in the West against racism, fascism, and social inequality; creating an international organisation without taking into consideration people's nationality, religion, sex and or political affiliation became an immediate necessity. Creating the International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR) was Mansoor Hekmat's response to these conditions. As he has said: 'Our entire life story is to change the lives of human beings.'

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and political Islam is racist against all Muslims is itself intrinsically racist because it assumes that Islam or political Islam represent all Muslims or all those born or living in the Middle East. This is no different from assuming that a criticism of fascism will incite anti-German sentiment as if all Germans represent or subscribe to fascism. In reality, there are numerous beliefs, political movements and classes in the Middle East as there are in Germany or Canada. Moreover, the culture and religion of any society is that of the ruling class', often times imposed by the extensive force and repression of the state, including via laws, policies and practices. If we take Iran as an example, we see that while the media and governments consider Iran Islamic, it is in fact the government in Iran that is Islamic and imposing its rules and regulations with brutal savagery. 100,000 have been killed resisting the imposition of Islam and political Islam. Hundreds of thousands of women have been harassed, imprisoned, flogged, and had acid thrown in their faces in their opposition to veiling and sexual apartheid and so on. If it were people's own choice then the Islamic regime in Iran would not need such an extensive machinery of repression and suppression to impose its rule on the people.

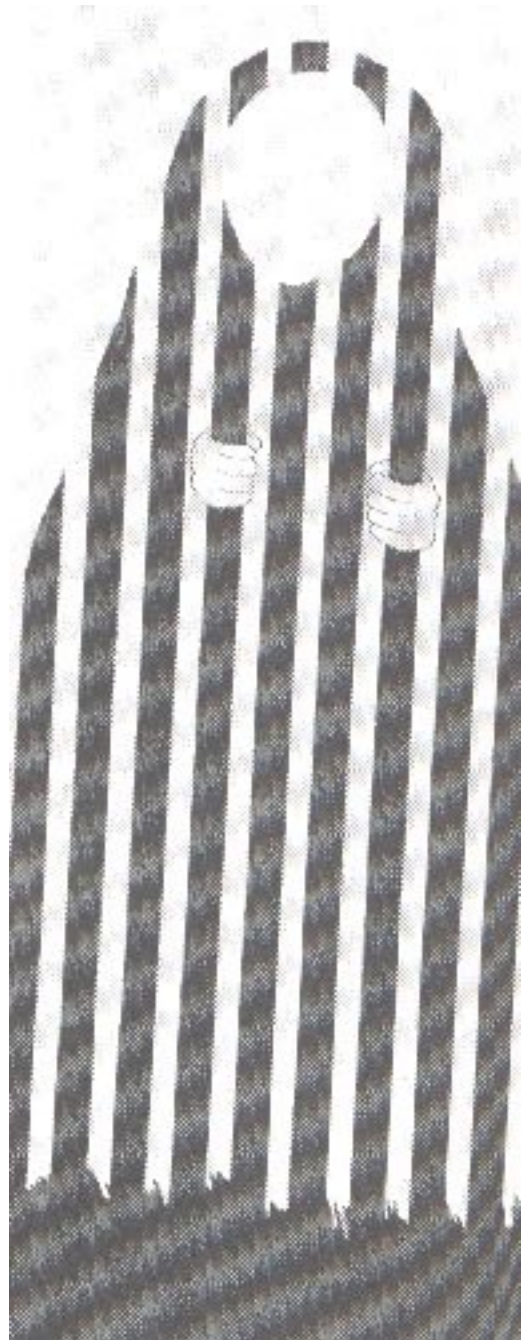
Also, considering a criticism of Islam and political Islam as a 'disrespect' to people's beliefs assumes that the

people born in or living in the Middle East are part and parcel of the Islamic regimes and movements that are slaughtering them. It's as if to say a criticism of Christianity in the USA disrespects all those living in America or a criticism of Judaism disrespects all those living in Israel! Of course this sort of generalisation only takes place when it comes to people living in the 'Third World' and not regarding those who live in the USA, Canada or Germany. When it comes to Iran or Iraq or Afghanistan, there is no longer any classes, political and social movements, communists, atheists, progressives, humanists, rationalists or secularists - all are Muslims!

Another consequence of this racism is the constant reminder by the likes of some CCR listserv members that we dissenters are not allowed to ever focus criticism on Islam or the Islamic regime of Iran or the status of women in Iran or the Middle East without first also criticising all other religions or states or the status of women in all other countries every single time. We are told that we fail to 'demonstrat[e] an acceptance of the equity of all faiths.' We are asked why we do not also criticise the violence faced by women in the USA or France. They tell us it is 'unfair' and 'biased' to only focus on the Islamic regime of Iran - what about all the repressive governments that are not Islamic?! Again, there is an

intrinsic racism at play here. How come they can criticise the Christian Right, Christianity, domestic violence or the Canadian government's asylum policies

we dissenters do it on Islam and political Islam - it's unfair and biased because we haven't included a whole host of other issues along with the one we are focusing on at the



without bringing in all political movements, religions, governments and the statuses of various segments in society throughout the rest of the world as well but when

time. Some CCR listserv members have asserted that along with a criticism of Islam, Judaism and Christianity should have been

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critiqued as well. What for? If you criticise the USA's attack on Iraq must you also criticise all attacks by all states at the same time in order to be fair and unbiased? When criticising domestic violence in Canada must you also speak about all other forms of violence against women not only in Canada but in the world every single time?! Of course not but again one can see how this argument is always and only used against us dissenters and always in the defence of some reaction, including Islam and political Islam.

The CCR asserts that my writings have not demonstrated 'an acceptance of the equity of all faiths.' 'That there are good and bad things done in the name of all faiths'. As if that is my responsibility to show that all beliefs including religions are equal. I do believe all religions are equally bad and destructive for human progress (though I suspect that is not the type of equity CCR was hoping for)! However, today, I believe that Islam and Islamism are most dangerous because it is power and or vying for political power; because it is responsible for genocide. That is why it concerns me; that is why I focus on it. In any case, I am not required to give the CCR a reason for why I focus on one injustice as opposed to another at any given time. Furthermore, I do not see any good in Islam to refer to it. That is the job of the mullahs, reactionaries,

the CCR or those who want to justify their own beliefs.

Of course, one must unequivocally defend and respect human beings; in my opinion human beings are all sacred irrespective of their beliefs but that is not the same as accepting the 'equity' of all beliefs and respecting them. Islam, fascism, nationalism, religion, misogyny, ethnocentrism are beliefs that are antithetical to humanism. They are not worthy of respect. Why must I respect fascism? It is a belief. During the 1930s and 40s, many people believed in it. Should members of the resistance have been told to respect it because it was people's culture and belief? While I don't believe Islam and political Islam are the majority's beliefs, even if it were why must it be respected? Or, again, is this rule only applicable to us dissenters? Why should such beliefs be tolerated? The usage of the term tolerance nowadays is itself a by-product of the garbage of multi-culturalism. Why must I 'tolerate' intolerable beliefs?

As an aside, what has the 'equity of all faiths and cultures' to do with an anti-racist policy? Cultural relativism and multi-culturalism have taken such a hold on the likes of the CCR that they have lost all semblance of rationality. It has made them so dim-witted that they prefer to defend reactionary beliefs irrespective of their

repercussions on real human beings; they prefer to consider a critique of reactionary beliefs racist rather than address the racism that people face every day, including that perpetrated by the CCR itself. They prefer to defend Islam and political Islam rather than stand up to it in a true defence of refugees fleeing political Islam and those living under its rule. In their inverted world of multi-culturalism, such nonsense may be passed off as an anti-racist policy; in the real world, however, not only would they not have a hope in hell of making such a verdict stick but they would be sued for libel. The CCR is following in the proud footsteps of the Canadian government, promoting multi-culturalism and cultural relativism that ghettoises and promotes double standards and rightlessness for the immigrant community and persons born in the 'Third World' on the one hand while directly or indirectly defending repressive regimes and movements on the other. While striving to silence those of us who refuse and resist.

Criticising reactionary beliefs and movements is an important aspect of critical thought

In today's world, a critique of Islam and political Islam is an important aspect of contemporary critical thought. It is progressive, rationalist and humanist. Since the Enlightenment of the 1800s, free-thinkers and

progressive movements have set about to free human beings from the shackles of religion, its superstitions and traditions. At the time, this critique was in response to Christianity and the Church and its political power, property and privileges; today, it is vis-à-vis Islam and its political movement. At the time it had to be uncompromising just as it must today. History has proven time and time again that reaction cannot be pushed back by compromising with it and appeasing it then giving this compromise a nice name like multi-culturalism or cultural relativism. Any compromise only justifies and maintains it. Labelling a criticism of Islam and political Islam racist is merely a way in which to suppress dissent and silence opposition. Political Islam does it by assassinations and repression; the CCR and like-minded cultural relativist organisations with censorship, restriction and false and slanderous labels.

Silencing criticism of Islam and political Islam from a progressive and anti-racist perspective paves the way for the Right, including such personalities as Pim Fortyn to do so from a racist and anti-human perspective. These Right-wing people and movements don't only deem Islam and political Islam backward and reactionary but label all Muslims and all those born in the Middle East as such. This cultural relativism and multi-culturalism pushes

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youth inundated with racism to join the political Islamic movement, e.g. the British youth who joined the Taliban or became suicide bombers, because it blocks the potential for an anti-racist perspective and alternative for youth disillusioned by racism. Consequently, it increases Islamic terrorism and provides a recruiting ground for political Islam.

Cultural relativism contributes to the New World Order

Cultural relativism aids and abets governments in crushing radicalism and the

struggle for justice and freedom and establishing right-wing laws and policies and contributes to the New World Order that is denying and revising all universal standards and norms that have been imposed by the Left and working class via long and hard struggles. Defending the contemporary free thinkers who oppose Islam and political Islam despite assassinations and threats from the Islamic movement, the justifications and support given to the Islamic movement and states by Western governments as well as slanders of racism by

the likes of CCR are the duty of all progressives everywhere.

For now, maybe, the business of multi-culturalism and cultural relativism is brisk. But sooner or later, Islam and political Islam and along with them all this cultural relativist and multi-cultural garbage will be pushed back and relegated to the rubbish bins of history where they rightfully belong. This has begun in Iran.

Footnote:

Relevant sections of the CCR Anti-Racism Policy advocate:

* The principles of equity for all races, languages, faiths and cultures reflected in the organization's policies, procedures and relations with staff, members and the society; where the communities that we serve, members of our organization, staff of our member agencies and those with whom we do business see themselves valued and reflected within the organization;

* Increasing awareness of and appreciation for the racial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of Canada;

* Promoting through all of its processes, practices and structures, an environment, which is free of discrimination and bias.

Refugees at Iraqi-Jordanian border at risk of being deported to Iraq,

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of insecurity, chaos and a fear for their lives.

As previously reported by the IFIR, conditions in the wind-swept and extremely hot area are abysmal and not fit for human beings. Of the 1050 Iranian refugees there, 400 are children, including 17 newborns from 1 to 6 months, 70 children from 6 months to two years and the rest are 2 to 11 years old. Conditions are life-threatening for the

children in particular.

In light of the fact that European countries along with the UNCHR are preparing to deport Iraqi asylum seekers back to the unsafe conditions of Iraq, the risk of the Iranians being deported there too is extremely serious. Denying the right to asylum and protection to thousands of Iraqi and Iranian refugees and ignoring the basic right of victims of war, insecurity and repression to gain refuge is one of the

realities of the asylum policies of Western governments and the UNHCR today. Security is gauged, not from the point of view of the harsh realities in Iraq, but from the point of view of George Bush. This inhumanity is the continuation of a trend that sacrifices and revises civil and human rights and freedoms for the political and economic interests of the USA in the region and is a characteristic of the New World Order.

IFIR calls on all groups and

organisations to step up their support of Iranian refugees at the Iraq-Jordanian border and demand the following:

1. Jordan and all countries bordering Iraq must open their borders to Iranian refugees among others.
2. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Jordanian government must provide necessary food, shelter, health care and sanitation to the refugees.
3. The right to asylum of Iranians must be recognised.

Sign our petition: <http://www.PetitionOnline.com/IFIRWPI/petition.html>. Only powerful and resolute protests will ensure that the Jordanian government and UNHCR comply with our legitimate demands.

The freedom of the Iraqi people is linked to your role and stance!

International Federation of Iraqi Refugees
27 April 2003



Dear friends!

After the killing of the people of Iraq during the past 12 years via intermittent bombardments of cities and economic sanctions, the USA and its allies have at last established a bigger and more destructive war against the people of Iraq without any consideration for international laws and principles. The justifications of Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction (although none have been found) were only to legitimise the inhumane plans of the USA. We all see that while they are in Iraq, they are threatening to attack Syria as well. It seems that the government of Bush has planned to topple many other 'dictators'!! But whatever the justifications are, the fact is that our world is facing the biggest and most dangerous dictator.

This USA's attack on Iraq is barbaric and a direct attack

on humanity. It has made the world's future more insecure and inhuman. It has helped terrorism and nationalism and effectively reinforced the reactionary front. The war has apparently ended and the despotic government of Saddam Hussein has fallen but civil war, religious and ethnic conflicts and lack of electricity, clean water, medicine and food have become a serious threat to the 25 million inhabitants of this society. The war never aimed to bring freedom, security and civil and individual rights for the people of Iraq. This requires that we defend these rights by demanding the immediate withdrawal of the USA's forces and that Iraqis choose their own political system under a free and secure climate.

Another important point nowadays is the threat of deportation hanging over hundreds of thousands of Iraqi

asylum seekers from European countries and neighbouring countries to Iraq. While the people of Iraq are living under the most difficult social, economic and political situation, European countries and Australia are planning to expel Iraqi asylum seekers under the pretext that Iraq has been rescued from the dictatorial Saddam Hussein. Also, most European countries like Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland have decided to freeze determinations on Iraqi asylum applications. The United Nations is supporting this plan.

The International Federation of Iraqi Refugees condemns this inhuman policy and is calling on all groups and individuals to defend Iraqi asylum seekers. Returning even one person to conditions of insecurity, rightlessness and lack of freedom is fully against international principles and norms. It is our right to ask for the protests of the international anti-war movement as an immense front to defend the lives, dignity and the future of the Iraqi people. Rescinding the inhumane policy of deportation is linked to raising your voices in protest. Millions of Iraqi people are waiting for your support and solidarity.

*** Sign a petition defending Iraqi asylum seekers and demanding deportations be stopped**

Because of suppression, killings, insecurity and lack of civil and individual rights in the past several decades, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis has been forced to flee and seek asylum. Many are languishing in neighbouring countries, Europe and Australia to gain protection. They have paid with their lives to gain the right to asylum. There were many that have committed suicide because they spent their lives waiting in camps without response. Today, when Iraqi society is facing its most insecure phase, most European countries has frozen Iraqi asylum cases and are awaiting a chance to deport them to Iraq. We, the undersigned, condemn this policy of these countries. The collapse of the Ba'ath regime does not equal freedom and security for the people of Iraq. Our demands are as follows:

1. Immediate cancellation of the deportation or freezing of casefiles of Iraqi asylum seekers.
2. The right to asylum for all the Iraqi asylum seekers.
3. The UN is duty-bound to defend asylum rights and prevent the deportation of Iraqi asylum seekers.

Name

Name of organization

Country & city

Date

For more information, contact
 fediraq@welho.com.

Letter from Canadian Union of Postal Workers defending Iranian refugees stranded at Jordanian border

April 30, 2003

File: 1305-A-700

His Excellency Ali Abu Ragheb
Prime Minister and Defence Minister
The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan
Amman
Jordan

Dear Prime Minister:

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) has been informed of the increasingly desperate plight of a large number of Iranian refugees stranded in the "no man's land" separating Jordan and Iraq. They have been forced to flee Iraq as a result of the war, bombardments and the ensuing insecurity. The conditions they face are deplorable, and include a severe lack of medical provisions and decent food and shelter.

Despite repeated calls to open its borders, your government to date has refused to allow these refugees into Jordan. At this dangerous and threatening time, CUPW, on behalf of its 50,000 members calls upon Jordan and other countries bordering Iraq to open their borders to Iranians and other refugees seeking protection and safety.

We also urge your government, in conjunction with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to provide the required shelter, food, health care and sanitation to these vulnerable people. Given the urgent nature of this situation, we also call upon Jordan to recognize the right to asylum of the Iranian refugees.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Deborah Bourque
National President
/cm opeiu 225

cc: Quaftan Majali, Minister of the Interior Jordan
National Executive Committee
National Union Representatives
Specialists

**Sign petition defending Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers:
<http://www.petitiononline.com/IFIR/petition.html>.**

JOIN IFIR

* I wish to join **the International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR)** as:

__ Member (£25.00 p.a.)__ Affiliated Group (£100.00 p.a.)

* I wish to make a donation of: £__ I wish to subscribe to Hambastegi English or Iran Monitor: __ (£50.00 p.a.)

Name: _____ **E-mail:** _____
Address: _____

Please make cheques payable to the International Federation of Iranian Refugees and mail to P. O. Box 27236, London N11 2ZF.

* I wish to make a standing order:

To: The Manager of (your Bank) _____
 (Address of your Bank) _____

Please pay **the International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR)** the sum of £_____ each month / quarter / year (delete as appropriate) until further notice and debit my Account no: _____ Sort Code: _____ starting on (date): _____

Name: _____ Address: _____
 Signature: _____

[FOR OFFICE USE ONLY] To: **International Federation of Iranian Refugees**, Lloyds TSB bank plc. Sort Code: 30-99-86, account no. 0057223.

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