

You Don't Need a Rabbi!

*Interrogating the Privilege of Theological Discourses after Ferguson*¹

—Santiago Slabodsky

The public sphere is full of revealing paradoxes. Among these, the uneven hierarchy between religious and racial discourses is particularly striking. Every time we witness a racially-motivated attack, progressive and well-intentioned religious leaders are quickly summoned to the site. They show their solidarity with the victims by proclaiming the existence of a unified humanity. In the event of a racial attack, religious diversity becomes a necessary response. Religiously-motivated attacks, however, elicit a different reaction. On most of these occasions, unless there is a clear intersectionality, it is very rare to see organizers summoning a group of racially diverse leaders to support the same call for humanity. On these occasions, racial or ethnic diversity just become superfluous, unnecessary. Some may even argue that is a competitive claim that blurs the protest against the religious attack. This distinction leaves us with a very clear lesson: while religious diversity comes to represent the solidarity of a unified humanity, racial diversity has become unnecessary, and is viewed as incapable of encompassing the same collectivity.

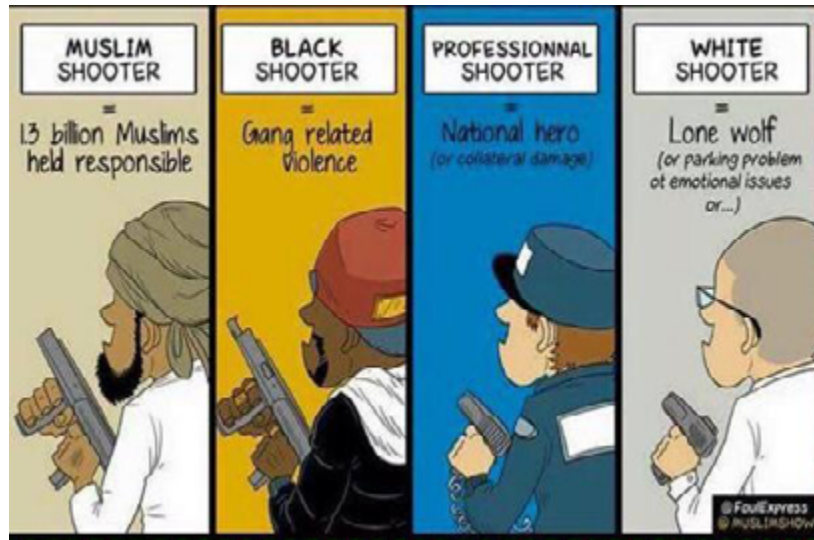
This is not necessarily surprising. From very early modernity, religious discourses have arrogated themselves the right to define the extension and bounds of humanity. Racial discourses have stemmed from their definitions. Today some of the best-intentioned religious leaders (and often scholars of religion) who intend to support anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter end up reifying the right of theological language to pontificate about the extension of humanity. Naturally, we cannot overlook the distinct responses to the question of who is/not human. We should differentiate between discourses that limit humanity to the perpetrators of “Just Wars” and arguments that also extend this humanity to their victims. Yet, what the entire spectrum has in common is that none of these positions question the discursive privilege of religion to define the extension and bounds of humanity.

While this may not be a problem for most secular readers interested in the role of religion in modern societies, contemporary activists post-Ferguson understood and denounced, probably before scholars, the trap that this discourse entails. They even go further by explaining the connection between this religious privilege and the trap posed by discourses on civility that limit the possibility of rebellion against the inhumanity that religious discourses have created. This short essay, then, intends to evaluate the tension between the good-will of religious discourses and their actual social role.

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Racial constructions have always been a central criterion for organizing societies in the modern world. On some occasions one perverse pattern becomes so evident that mediations crack and the struggle against the structure crystalizes. During the last two years we have seen a particularly crude manifestation of some of these social constructions. In 2014 and 2015, this pattern was reproduced in Ferguson and its multiple after-maths in various cities across the nation, and in the rampant Islamophobia that manifested itself following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. In this context a wonderful drawing began to appear across various accounts in the *Facebook market of Ideas*:



The picture is both simple and provocative. On the right we see the reaction when a white person perpetrates the shooting. If “he” is a representative of the state’s “legitimate” monopoly of violence, he becomes a hero, and if not, “he” is characterized as a lone wolf with emotional issues (or parking problems). But when the perpetrator of the shooting is a person of color the story is different. If a Muslim is a shooter of the “barbaric” act, all 1.3 billion Muslims are held responsible. Furthermore, the entire *Ummah* is asked to show its solidarity with victims who could well be some of the perpetrators of the harshest Islamophobia. If the shooter is a black person, “he” is quickly linked with “gang” violence and the occurrence is portrayed as a nonsensical attack perpetrated by those who are inherently incapable of engaging with the progress of civilization. The racial minorities, in other times called barbarians or primitives, take out their frustration on the fittest, those who allegedly achieved their success by merit alone.

These two ideal types are not new. Today’s Muslims are attacked for allegedly trying to conquer the world and impose an alternative way of life against the will of a free West. Not too long ago, it was the figure the Jewish Bolshevik, and not that of the Islamic Jihadist, that fulfilled the same role. It comes as no surprise, then, that the discourses that today challenge the absorption of Syrian refugees reproduce almost the same stereotypes that were applied to Jews who failed to find asylum and perished in the Holocaust. Today Afro-Americans are attacked for allegedly perpetrating nonsensical violence that disrupts the “natural” progressive development of civilized life. Yesterday, the figure of the Native fulfilled the same role. One need only to open a browser in Netflix to see how Hollywood defines to our days the figure of the “Indian” as inherently incapable of understanding the “advance” of civilization and as randomly using crude “savagery” to try to stop the inevitable European settlement.



These two collaborative types of otherness are not novel. They respond to over five centuries of Euro-Christian discursive privilege in defining the extension of humanity. The narrative that interprets Black/Native behavior describes them as monolithic collectives who *lack* the precondition of humanity. In different periods this precondition was re-defined in response to epistemological changes in the system. In the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries the precondition was that of having a soul or religion; in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, it was history; in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries, it was civilization; in the twentieth century development; and in the twenty-first, democracy. Throughout these periods, discourses questioned whether or not enslaved Africans, Natives, and then Africans and Latin-Americans (among others) met the precondition. While modern society may have “advanced” for the privileged, this discourse continued to be entrenched in modern structures and has actualized itself in ways that continued victimizing the same populations.

The second narrative, which was traditionally applied to Jews and Muslims, presents collectives accused of opposing Euro-Christianity and, therefore, of having the *wrong* precondition. So, again, between the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries they were defined as having the wrong religion, history, and civilization. In the nineteenth century two interrelated factors, imperialism in Muslim majoritarian regions and the complex exteriority of European Jews in the continent, forcibly incorporated Muslims and Jews into the system as Africans and Natives had been. It is no surprise, then, that they started to be defined by their *lack* of civilized behavior, development, and currently—especially for Muslims—democracy. So, in Euro-Christian discourses, these two parallel narratives of racialization, which had overlapped for centuries in other areas, started to converge in the Euro-Christian right to define the extension and bounds of humanity. Even those who fought to affirm the humanity of these victims rarely challenged the Euro-Christian right to delimit these victims’ humanity.

The activists of Black Lives Matters understood, with intense clarity, that the right to define humanity is at the core of the problem. When they insist that the problem is the negation of humanity, they are not just denouncing a circumstantial discourse in police departments. They are confronting a longstanding pattern that describes their alleged *lack* (of soul, religion, civilization, development. . .) as a precondition of (that excludes them from) humanity. They are protesting against over five hundred years of a Euro-Christian discourse that arrogates itself the right to define who is human and who is not.

When priests, pastors and rabbis intervene in the protests claiming, with prophetic fervor, that they know the true meaning of humanity, they are not necessarily helping. On the contrary, they end up reifying the right of religion and theology to set the conditions of humanity. So it is no surprise, therefore, when we hear these voices periodically connect two factors: the religious privilege to define humanity and the prescription that protesters should follow civil rules while confronting the negation of their humanity. This connection ignores that the problem originates from the same civilization that first arrogates itself the right to define who is human/not and now intends to arrogate itself the right to define the conditions for its rebellious contestation. Black Lives Matter, with provocative lucidity, rejects this intervention. After insisting on the right to fight for one’s humanity, the activists write:

Many know that the black church was central to the civil rights movement, as many black male preachers became prominent civil rights leaders. This current movement has a very different relationship to the church than movements past. Black churches and black preachers in Ferguson have been on the ground helping since the early days after Michael Brown’s death. . . .But protesters patently reject any. . .theology about keeping the peace, praying copiously, or turning the



other cheek. Such calls are viewed as a return to passive respectability politics. . . (blacklivesmatter.com)

Notwithstanding different narratives about the role of religion in the Civil Rights movement, my intention is to interpret the stand of the activists. Religion, according to this reading, is a call for political respectability that is in the U.S. a clear sign of civilization and democracy, one that has been classified by Euro-Christianity as a precondition of humanity. Religion, first, arrogated itself the authority to define who is human and who is not. Now it also claims to know how the people whose humanity was negated should behave while rebelling. While observing the rules amounts to accepting forced inclusion in a system that negated their humanity, rejecting them—in the use of violence, etc.—will confirm their inhumanity. As such, the rules of civilization offer no exit from one's constructed lack of humanity.

It is important to note, however, that Euro-Christianity is not the only tradition that holds this privilege nowadays. Judaism in the Global North follows a similar pattern. After having been denied their humanity for between two and five hundred years before the Holocaust, the normative Jewry led by Euro-American elites was unable to resist the integration into a now normative Judeo-Christian tradition. There is always a rabbi ready to pontificate about humanity in the U.S. when an Afro-American is attacked. There is always a mediatic intellectual eager to explain the limited reach of civilization in France when Muslims fight against Islamophobia. And there is always a minister urged to emphasize the role of democratic values in Israel and limiting the right of Palestinians to rebel against their de-humanization beyond the roles of civility. Re-centering in the U.S. context, a rabbi is always summoned to represent diversity. Tragically, today, he/she manifests its limitations.

Of course the permeation of this discourse goes well beyond Judeo-Christianity. In our context there is little space for full autonomy. But at this point it is important to assume one's own positionality and restrain from *punching down* communities that are currently being persecuted or simply negated. I will leave it up to critical thinkers of Muslim and Sikh communities attacked in the context of rampant Islamophobia or leading practitioners of Santería and Candombé fighting against their invisibilization, to evaluate which elements of their tradition have reproduced the problem and which ones offer an exit from it. After all they are not yet a fixed feature of the universal interfaith community that is summoned when a racial attack takes place as ministers with a collar or yarmulke are.

This essay does not intend to ask priests, pastors, and rabbis to desist in their support of the anti-racist movement. I am not questioning their solidarity. I am questioning the privilege that enables them to present their conception of humanity as timeless pearls of wisdom that should be applied to people who lack transcendence. I urge these discourses to recognize that their own conceptions have been constructed historically for socio-political reasons and how their use of civil discourses of love and humanity reproduce some of the most problematic parts of this narrative. I am even questioning the strategic usefulness of reiterating the same discourse at a time in which the victims have understood the perversity of theological privilege. I am indeed questioning the need of having someone with a yarmulke each time there is a racial attack. The activists, let me conclude, don't need a rabbi (or a priest, or a pastor).





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