

## Article

# Is Violence Critique?

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**Abstract:** The offence and violence surrounding episodes like the Salman Rushdie Affair and the Danish cartoon controversies have furnished Western critique of Islam. While important work has challenged this criticism of Islam by interrogating the secular foundations of critique, the relationship between violence and critique remains troubling. Through reflecting on an excerpt from an attempted murder trial following an attack in purported retaliation for offending Islam in an English prison, this article considers an expanded notion of violence that recognizes the structural conditions behind violence and the political stakes that prioritize the psychological and ideological drivers that service criticism of Islam. This article builds on scholarship that explored the State and the violent actions of non-State actors and the critical studies of hate crimes, Islamist extremism, and radicalization to reflect on the role of critique in the aftermath of violence and to ask: “Is violence critique?” It argues for an approach to violence-as-critique by recognizing how emotion and violence are not merely resident inside the fanatical body that protrudes outwards but are instead part of the wider, circulating, and unstable affective economies of structural violence where violences can be mutually reinforcing.

**Keywords:** Islamist extremism; Danish cartoon controversy; Rushdie Affair; moral injury; secularism; radicalization; structural violence; prison; hate



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## 1. Introduction

“Would you regard yourself as a devout Muslim, Mr [Hamad]?” [the prosecuting lawyer] asked. “Practising, yes”, Mr [Hamad] replied. [The prosecuting lawyer] said: “Isn’t the reality of the situation, Mr [Hamad], that the rumour we began this case with, the rumour of the insult to the Prophet, was something that angered you and burned within you for a long time?” “No, and I will explain”, said [Hamad]. “Just answer the question”, said [The prosecuting lawyer]. [Hamad] said: “I’m not trying to argue with you, I’m trying to give my defence . . . I’ve heard ‘Mussy bastard’, I’ve heard ‘Get on your prayer mat and fly off’, I’ve heard ‘F Allah’—no reaction—I’m desensitized . . . You’re trying to say I’ve fanatical, radicalised views . . . I grew up in this country. My religion is a religion of peace and patience.” “Eloquently put, Mr [Hamad], I’m sure the jury will decide”, said [The prosecuting lawyer], “I’m suggesting this rumour angered you considerably and angered [your friend] considerably.” “No”, said [Hamad]. (Bristow 2014)

A courtroom drama recalled events in a high security prison where two Muslim prisoners attacked a non-Muslim prisoner who purportedly offended the Prophet Mohammed. The trial was for attempted murder, and the reported dialogue between one of the defendants and the prosecuting lawyer leaned on tropes of Muslim rage—an anger that “burned” in response to the rumors circulating that another prisoner had insulted Islam.

The events that had occurred during my period of fieldwork in the same high security prison in England drew remarkable and tragic parallels with other episodes of violence outside the prison: the 2004 murder of the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh (Eyerman 2008); the 2015 attacks on the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo; the 2020 murder of school teacher Samuel Paty in Paris in association with his classroom discussion of

the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad; and the 2022 attack on Salman Rushdie over thirty years after the controversy sparked due to his fictional work, *The Satanic Verses*. This violence has served as an exclamation mark evidencing the incompatibilities of Islam with Western values—an embodiment of the specter of the Islamist extremist. While important critical scholarship, particularly the pioneering work, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Asad et al. 2013), has challenged this criticism of Islam by interrogating the secular foundations of critique, the relationship between violence and critique remains troubling.

In this paper, I share in the task pursued in the volume *Is Critique Secular?* of reflecting on critique and the contingent conditions within which judgements are made. In foregrounding violence, I want to ask what kind of critique might lie at the heart of this type of violence. Reflecting on the excerpt from the attempted murder trial quoted in the above epigraph, this article considers the political stakes that prioritize the psychological and ideological drivers that service the critique of Islam, and develops an expanded notion of violence that recognizes the structural conditions behind violence. I take cues from scholarship that explored the State and the violent actions of non-State actors and critical studies of hate crimes, Islamist extremism, and radicalization (Ahmed 2001; Fadil et al. 2019; Asad 2007; Butler 2009; Fadil 2020). I ask of the relationship of violence and critique: What can we learn about violence in liberal democracies when violence is framed through recourse to psychological and ideological fanaticism? Can violence instead be listened to as a form of critique, without condoning it or diminishing its harms? If so, what kind of critique is violence?

In reflecting on the role of critique in the aftermath of violence, and in asking, “Is violence critique?”, I argue for an approach to violence-as-critique that recognizes how emotion and violence are not merely resident inside the fanatical body that protrudes outwards but are instead part of the wider, circulating, and unstable “affective economies” (Ahmed 2001) of structural violence. Violence, then, is not predetermined but “violences” (Das et al. 2000) can be mutually reinforcing. I begin by summarizing the work, *Is Critique Secular?*, to show a continuation and departure in my own focus on violence and critique. I then examine the politics surrounding the structural critique of violence stemming from “Islamist extremism” by reflecting on how locating violence in psychological and ideological drivers reaffirms the fanatical body and mind and by asking: What does psychologizing violence achieve politically? What does it tell us about secular engagements with “religious” violence in liberal democracies? Finally, in asking “Is violence critique?”, I argue towards understanding the circulating and unstable affects and effects of structural violence that reside in but are unconstrained by and exceed the individual, bounded, “fanatical” subject. Taking the trial excerpt, the prison context, and racialized experience as points of analysis, I argue for listening to violence to consider violences as mutually reinforcing.

Overall, this essay wrestles with the unsettling realities of violence—its victims, its instigators, and its social and political surroundings. How do we think and write about violence and its structural conditions without condoning it, denying its horror, or negating a deeply felt moral repugnance and the damage inflicted on society and on its victims? In asking, often in a state of visceral shock following a murder or terrorist attack, “how did this happen?”, is there space to critique the wider frames within which people commit atrocities? Can violence be “read” or “listened to” as critique without condoning it? Can violence prompt societal and institutional introspection and what kind of introspection is owed and to whom? I begin by revisiting the arguments in *Is Critique Secular?* that offered a novel way of thinking about critique.

## 2. The Contingent Conditions for Judgement

In their volume *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, published in 2009 and republished in 2013, Mahmood et al. (2009) reflected on the debate that ensued and the public outcry of many Muslims around the world after the publication of the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. The terms of the public debate on

the publications and the Muslim (over-)reaction were widely claimed as evidence of the purported incommensurability of Western values of freedom of speech and the inherent backward, zealous, and fundamentalist tethering of Islam to blasphemy. The volume aimed to open up the debate in ways that moved beyond the binary between free speech and blasphemy. Taking, as its departure point, the question “is critique secular?”, it followed a productive stream of inquiry that took secularism not as a given—a neutral principle of separating Church (religion) from State or, as with secularization, a process (Salomon 2016, p. 34)—but as one that saw the category of the secular as the “twin” of modern religion (Asad 2001, p. 221). In short, secularism, like religion, comes with a host of affects, sensibilities, and criteria for judgement and evaluation that make it just as much subject to investigation and analysis as its religious counterpart. *Is Critique Secular?* (Asad et al. 2013) interrogated the assumptions that hold criticism as a distinctive, enlightened value of secularism that is not only normatively superior to Islamic outlooks but is the sole possessor of such a capacity.

For these authors, critique was about calling into question the established frameworks of evaluation (Butler 2013, p. 108). It was not a judgement but instead was an inquiry into the conditions that make judgement possible; it was an ongoing, incomplete “effort to identify what we depend upon when we claim to know anything at all” (ibid., p. 110). This led Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood to take a similar approach in responding to the controversies surrounding the Danish cartoons. Asad (2013) enquired into the ontology of the self-owning subject that underpins free speech arguments compared to a relational ontology that underpins theological claims against free speech. Mahmood (2013), sharing this mode of critique in opening up the contingent conditions for judgement, showed how a “semiotic ideology” underpins the Western views of Muslim moral injury in response to the Danish cartoons that was informed by a particularly Western Protestant view of religion. In asking whether critique is secular, the authors aimed to open up the assumptions that enable secularism to reinforce incompatibilities between Islam in the West.

This contingent way that judgments are made was illustrated in Saba Mahmood’s chapter where she observed the Danish cartoon controversy as representing an incommensurable divide between strong religious beliefs and secular values. This divide saw the “threat of ‘religious extremism’ that haunts our world today” as in need of taming by secular reason (Mahmood 2013, p. 59). As conflicts flared up in 2005 and 2008 in response to the publishing and republishing of the cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad, a sharp divide grew between secular values, along with their lifestyles and liberal freedoms, and Islam, which represented religious extremism and irrationalism. The controversy and its unfolding signaled deep civilizational differences, emboldening secular critics of Islam, as blasphemy was considered irrelevant to the modern present, a relic of religion and tradition. Religious extremism was a useful placeholder for a constellation of practices and images that held the public imagination in liberal democratic countries of Islam, including suicide bombers, veiled and oppressed women, violent and angry mobs, and vitriolic preachers.

Mahmood sought to unsettle the moral impasse of public discourse around blasphemy by calling attention to the normative conceptions underlying the purported clash between secular values and religious threats. Mahmood’s argument was to underscore that “events deemed extremist or politically dangerous are often not only reductive of the events they purport to describe but, more importantly, also premised on normative conceptions of the subject, religion, language, and law that are far more fraught than the call for decisive political action allows” (Mahmood 2013, p. 60). By framing the debate in terms of racism, Mahmood argued that the political Left rendered invisible the conceptual vocabulary that made it possible to understand the outcry against the cartoons.

Mahmood introduced the problem as a translational one, pointing to a “semiotic ideology” (Mahmood 2013, p. 64) that was tethered to a secular conception of religion. Mahmood observed that liberals and progressives interpreted those who took offence as suffering from a confusion over the relationship between religious symbols/icons and the devotional content of sacred figures, a condition she referred to as a “semiotic ideology”:

“religious signs—such as the cross—are not embodiments of the divine but only stand in for the divine through an act of human encoding and interpretation” (Mahmood 2013, p. 67). Muslims who expressed outrage at the offence of religious symbols or figures were subject to a category mistake that confused the divine status of the subject of devotion, Muhammad, with the object that elicited offence, the pictorial depictions of the Prophet. Moreover, Mahmood offered an alternative reading of Muslim moral injury based on the Muslim commitment to a relationship to the Prophet that was grounded in similitude and cohabitation (Mahmood 2013, p. 82). Her aim was to explore how the concept of moral injury has remained unintelligible in the public debate on the cartoon controversy, as there are difficulties in translating across different “semiotic and ethical norms” (Mahmood 2013, p. 83). Mahmood’s project illustrated critique that worked to open up the contingent conditions within which judgements are made, underscoring how the terms of the debate around blasphemy are layered with secular assumptions about religion.

Talal Asad similarly offered a reworking of critique in his exploration of violence. The operative mode of critique that he offered enables an uncovering of the conditions under which we respond in judgement and the surrounding moral and affective responses. In his reflections on violence in his book, *On Suicide Bombing* (Asad 2007), Asad challenged his readers with a comparative framework for thinking about why we respond to violence as we do, with what affect, and with what sorts of moral evaluations. By opening inquiry into what is objectionable violence and what violence is taken for granted, Asad called his readers to reflect on the contingent feelings in which we feel shock, outrage, and moral disgust. Why does death and violence in the name of God, he prompted, shock secular liberal sensibilities compared to death for the secular nation? Asad helped to break down the assumptions that justified violence is the sole prerogative of the State and that unjustified violence is the domain of illegitimate states/insurgency movements. Asad’s framework is upsetting to readers because it reveals the “contingent conditions under which we feel shock, outrage, and moral revulsion” (Butler 2013, p. 102). It raised for us the question of why we may experience more horror at one act of violence than another. Through Asad’s analysis and in his examples of military conflicts in Muslim-majority countries, we are confronted with a self-awareness that our affect, emotion, and reactions are sustained by “implicitly racist and civilizational schemes” that organize affect differently (ibid., pp. 100–1). “We are shocked and outraged by our lack of shock” (ibid., p. 102). We have judged and evaluated the value of life differently. Asad showed how the normative dispositions of the secular and liberal perspectives give capacity to claims concerning what is objectionable violence and grievable death and showed how these framings circumscribe understanding of military conflict (see also Butler 2013, p. 101). By doing so, he facilitated a critique of a “parochial and consequential” framing of violence (ibid.).

A parochial view of critique and violence services certain norms and judgements. These scholars want us to think differently about critique and violence, and they showed how contingent evaluations of judgement are. They interrogated the sources of critique and the power constellations that direct and locate critique. Next, I inquire into the politics and the affects behind critique in the aftermath of violence.

### 3. Individualizing the Muslim Fanatic

Following the attack on Salman Rushdie in the US, a BBC correspondent, in a televised interview with the moderator of the event who was also brutally injured, asked, “Are the values that Salman Rushdie represents to you all the more important in the wake of what’s happened to him?” To which the injured moderator of the event replied, “There couldn’t be anything more vivid in its instantiation of our values” (BBC 2022). The tendency to read violence as an effect of culture clashes and incompatibilities between Islam and the West was described by Mahmood Mamdani as “culture talk”, or the “predilection to define cultures according to their presumed ‘essential’ characteristics” (2022, p. 766). Defaulting to cultural explanations of political outcomes, Mamdani argued, dehistoricizes and decontextualizes the construction of political identities, which was an argument he

applied to understanding modern terrorism as “born of an encounter”. Sharing this political thrust, Mihaela Mihai explored in relation to the “affairs” of political memory how there is a colonization of memory that enables selective readings that serve political agendas. As the Rushdie Affair became emblematic of the clash between Western values and Islam, it serviced such a colonization of public memory. For my purposes, the location of critique in culture and public “affairs” is telling for the political reasons that Mamdani and Mihai suggested, underscoring the political stakes behind critique.

Here I illustrate the political stakes behind critique in consideration of the responses to the violence in the streets of Paris in the murder of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in 2020 and the violence of “Islamist extremism” in English prisons. In both examples, critique was situated in the mind and body of the fanatic by individualizing violence, and this location of critique serves political purposes that reinforce the Otherness of Islam while distracting from critique that contextualizes and historicizes violence. The politics underlying these debates is deeply affective. The alternative to individualizing violence, presented in the final section of this paper, is to rethink the location of violence as extending beyond the body, as scholars of hate crimes have offered, and to consider the wider “affective economies” within which hate and violence circulate (Ahmed 2001, p. 347).

In the wake of the horrific death of Samuel Paty in Paris in 2020 that followed a tragic spin of his classroom discussion on the Danish cartoons, commentators and academics sought to raise questions that exceeded the common frames of Muslim pathology, Islamist ideology, and value clashes. However, Nadia Fadil wrote of how she was accused of “victim blaming” as she sought to respond in some measured way to the tragedy by locating violence against a broader background of the ongoing public debates on Islam and the social positioning of Muslims. These accusations of victim blaming signaled her unintentional entrance into a politically infused ethical no-go area that triggered a personal backlash against her. To gesture towards the structural conditions of racism (Bruckner 2018) or to the deeper workings of the secular state (Khosrokhavar 2020b) was considered to legitimize terrorist violence by giving credence to their Manichean worldview and to deny the true dangers of Islam and the value clashes between Islam and the West (Fadil 2020). The desire for commentators and academics to reflect on ways to critique both the violence and the conditions in which it arose was met with dismissal, blaming, and, for Farhad Khosrokhavar, “censorship” (Khosrokhavar 2020a). The blowback that faced these authors illustrates how political discourses leverage violence as self-confirming evidence for the inherent incompatibility of Islam and Muslims in the West. Critique had a singular direction of travel and served to individualize and pathologize Muslim violence. The categories of blasphemy and Islamic extremism work in similar ways as the category of an “honour crime” that has a “polymorphous interpretive capacity” (Abu-Lughod 2011) and, as I detail further below, illustrates exclusionary state practices reflective of nation-states’ disciplinary work on specific ethno-religious groups.

The backlash against Fadil and the persistent location of critique in Muslim fanaticism detracts from the work of contextualizing violence. There are striking parallels between the critique that arose from the violence in the streets of Paris and that which arises from prison violence, and the street and prison represent different fields for the politics of critique to play out. The debate around Islamist extremism was reignited in the prison context following two separate incidences by two recently released persons in 2019. “For the last decade and half”, QC Jonathan Hall began his statement of the problem in his inquiry into terrorism in prisons published in April 2022, “groups of prisoners in the Prison Estate have adopted an anti-State Islamist stance that condones or encourages violence towards non-Muslim prisoners, prison officers and the general public” (Hall 2022, p. 8). The issue of prison radicalization and Islamist radicalization in English prisons strikes some remarkable parallels with the politicized debates found outside prisons though the similarities are easily hidden by the heft of prisons as institutions and the general ignorance surrounding them.

The response to violence in the streets of Paris and inside English prisons share a mode of critique that individualizes, and even pathologizes, violence. Writing as the prison



service's lead on the Ministry of Justice review of extremism in prisons, Ian Acheson calls out the prison service for failing to acknowledge the "toxic ideology" at work in prisons. The dominance of this ideology and its catastrophic implications are a common source of commentary on Islamist extremism in prison that tends to focus on either how violent offenders come to find an ideology that encourages violence or, for those convicted for terrorist-related offences, propel a move "creeping ever closer" to committing an act of murder in prison (De Simone 2020). Acheson issued pressure on the prison service to respond swiftly and decisively to ensure that "their toxic ideology is not just contained somehow but is actively challenged" (ibid.). However, is there more that can be asked of critique in the wake of the violence that Acheson wrote about and anticipated? Must critique pay attention only to uncovering the "real motives", the dominance of a "toxic ideology", and the use of "religion for political ends"? Is better regulation and improved prison governance against a "toxic ideology" the solution to growing "anti-State" attitudes, especially when considering "anti-State" attitudes may be "born of an encounter"? As William Cavanaugh (2009) and Talal Asad (2007) argued, these arguments tell us much about secular engagements with "religious" violence in liberal democracies. They speak to a "secular episteme" (Mahmood 2013) that directs critique outward towards the fanatical Other rather than situating critique within wider considerations of power, the contexts within which violence occurs, and interactive processes. Critical studies of radicalization have made similar claims about the work achieved by the social scientific category of radicalization (Kundnani 2012).

Psychologizing violence, then, performs political work by leveraging critique against insidious Others, and it avoids institutional introspection. Analyzing critique in this sense offers a useful index for understanding the configurations of power that legitimize some forms of critique over others. Next, I examine how we might listen to violence, and how critique demands a rethinking of violence in ways that exceed the individual, bounded, "fanatical" subject.

#### 4. Listening to Violence beyond the Bounded Subject

The question, "is violence critique?", considers the interaction between state power, secularism, and violence. Locating violence in the bounded, fanatical body and mind hides the wider, circulating, and unstable affective economies of structural violence. Reflecting on the excerpt from the attempted murder trial, I consider how violences are not determinative but may be mutually reinforcing.

The volume, *Is Critique Secular?* (Asad et al. 2013) gestured to the interactive effects between religion and secular powers to consider how secularism is not neutral towards religion. Talal Asad considered how legal commentators on the Danish cartoon controversy saw the Muslim use of European hate speech laws as a ruse and as a way to sneak in Islamic radicalism and values into Europe and destroy the "Europe of the Enlightenment" (Asad 2013, p. 74). European legal frameworks for hate speech laws were limited, in view of the unruliness of many Islamic fundamentalists and their purported threat, and were embedded within overriding considerations for public order and security, "where Muslims have come to be perceived as a threat to state security" (Asad 2013). Much scholarship on the securitization of Muslims has shared this skepticism of the neutrality of the law and policing in counterterrorism and counter-radicalization policies and practice (Fadil et al. 2019). This attention to secularism as a "political episteme" provokes questions into where and how the secular state is entangled with religion, transforms the content of religion, and can produce new violences against minority groups (Agrama 2010, pp. 79–80; Beaman 2008). Judith Butler, in responding to Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood's work, introduced the value of considering secularism as a mode of power:

"These two anthropologists are trying to get us to expand our understanding of what was at stake, but I gather they are doing this because they think not just that we should all become more knowledgeable (and that broader knowledge of our world is a moral good) but also that the secular terms should not have the

power to define the meaning or effect of religious concepts. This is an important argument to make in order to combat a kind of *structural injury*, emblemized by events like the Danish cartoons, inflicted on religious and racial minorities (especially when religious minorities are racialized). This last is a strong normative claim, and I want to suggest that it becomes possible to consider the injustice of this situation of *hegemonic secularism* only when we pass through a certain displacement of taken-for-granted modes of moral evaluation, including certain established juridical frameworks.” (Butler 2013, p. 99 emphasis added)

Butler gestured towards structural injury and hegemonic secularism, suggesting that there are wider legacies of exclusion within which moral injury occurs and is experienced by European Muslims. This is a different argument than the “semiotics of the icon” in Mahmood’s arguments for critique as involving issues of translation. It involves, rather, crucial attention to the interpretative self-reflection of Muslims and their social positioning vis-à-vis rights and belonging in Europe.

Violence and protest must be listened to against a wider background of social inequality, as the protests against Salman Rushdie’s novel in British industrial towns illustrated genuine inequality under English blasphemy laws that protected Anglican Christianity but not ethnic minority religions (Werbnier 2002). It is also a relevant, if thorny, issue in prisons, where counterterrorism practices seem to over-police Muslim bodies (Liebling and Williams 2017) and where a victim script has both an experiential and ideological component (Williams and Liebling 2022). Therefore, there is space here to consider the location of affect within the wider fields of radicalization and exclusion of European Muslims and to consider how secularism, through its structures such as the law and in institutions like prison, might contribute to these exclusions and compound the experience of moral injury (Williams 2021). These are directions of inquiry that are closed off by recourse to the fanatical Muslim body. Importantly, there is no determinism of the affective response (Ahmed 2001), but neither is affect—or “rage”—an intrinsic property of a group. Instead, emotions are embedded in wider circulations of affect and wider contexts.

The racial state and David Goldberg’s discussion of postraciality provided some texture into the difficulties we have in relating the ontological experiences of racialization to responsibility and political violence. According to Goldberg, the “neoliberal spirit” individualizes responsibility (Goldberg 2015, p. 62), and for my purposes, this makes it easy to locate the responsibility onto individuals armed with a “toxic ideology”. However, there are contradictory forces at work within postraciality and within the judgement that is applied to Muslims who commit acts of political violence in response to moral injury. On the one hand, and relevant to the prison context, there is a terrorism–radicalization matrix that holds together a securitized view of Muslims that links them to problems of order, control, and violence in prisons. This locates responsibility on the group or ideology. On the other hand, the neoliberal spirit individualizes responsibility and, in so doing, can hold those individuals responsible for violence, or potential violence (Williams 2021), to account through the conceptual framing of radicalization.

There are then two forces or logics at play that seem to be in contradiction: laying responsibility on an ideology as a (sub)group problem and laying responsibility as a problem of individual pathology and ideology. These go hand in hand and reinforce each other in a way that is characteristic of postraciality, where the “neoliberal skepticism about the agency of social groups generally has encouraged the erosion of racial connectivity, and by extension any ontological claim to racial groups more broadly” (Goldberg 2015, p. 63). In postraciality, there is a denial of racial experience as an ontological experience of groups, which closes down opportunities for, and makes taboo, any critique of structural conditions.

Postracial logic hides the institutional and structural critique of the ontological conditions that structure racialized experience. The psychologization of Muslim violence serves as a ready-to-hand mode of making sense of violence while denying any wider patterns of

reinforcing the racialization of Muslims that would acknowledge that violence is always socially and situationally embedded.

Racialized experience is, however, as much a part of the criminal justice system in the UK as it is in the US though their histories and catalyzing moments differ. A catalyzing moment in the UK was the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence that highlighted institutional racism in the criminal justice system. The inquiry (Macpherson et al. 1999) marked a turning point for prisons that brought into view the need for closer attention to the diversity, treatment, and specific needs of persons in prison (Durrance and Williams 2003). Persons from “BAME” (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) backgrounds continue to receive attention in criminal justice reform efforts as recent data shows them to be over-represented in the criminal justice system. People from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds also report more negative experiences and are identified as having worse outcomes compared to their white counterparts (HM Government 2017). While the British State has historically included religion as part of its wider race relations (Genders et al. 1989), recent reviews have observed the over-representation of Muslims in prison. The reasons behind this over-representation of Muslims in British prisons are layered and complex, and “why the number of Muslim prisoners has increased by nearly 50% in the last ten years” is largely unknown (HM Government 2017, p. 13).

Focusing critique on a “toxic ideology” and the pathology of people apart from their social and structural conditions contributes at best to a partial analysis. A host of scholarship on prison radicalization supports a move away from the critique of individual pathologies and ideologies towards a critique of different prisons and their management practices, conditions, and climates. In the US context, for example, Mark Hamm’s work on prison radicalization made the central point that understanding the differences between prisons tells us much more about radicalization than pointing to ideological or pathological drivers. In the UK context, Williams and Liebling offered detailed comparative work into high security prisons that highlighted different levels of “political charge” (anger and alienation, see Liebling 2015), and these different social, political, and management climates of different prisons had profound effects on how prisoners were able to engage with religious identity, how they were able to challenge extremist ideologies, and the instances of violence (Williams and Liebling 2022).

Returning now to the excerpt from the attempted murder trial that introduced this paper, the prosecuting lawyer denied racial experience and framed racism as merely “Muslim rage”. The defendant refused to accept the reduction of his actions to rage or fanaticism. He affirmed his personal experience of racism but denied that it served as a political lever that drove his actions. The defendant’s response of being “desensitized” both affirmed his own personal experience of racism, but it also illustrated that his actions were not driven by racism: racism was an existential and ontological reality, but he refused that reality as the explanation for his violent actions. This refusal to have his experiences of racism determine recourse to violence served to disrupt the dominant narrative of radicalization that pathologized and reduced his experience to ideological commitments. The defendant, Mr Hamad, refused to have his ontological experience of radicalization reduced to fanaticism:

“I’ve heard ‘Mussy bastard’, I’ve heard ‘Get on your prayer mat and fly off’, I’ve heard ‘F Allah’—no reaction—I’m desensitized . . . You’re trying to say I’ve fanatical, radicalized views . . . I grew up in this country. My religion is a religion of peace and patience.” (Bristow 2014)

Mr Hamad denied that the rumor of the offence against the Prophet Mohammad angered him and his codefendant, as the prosecuting lawyer argued, “I’m suggesting this rumour angered you considerably and angered [your friend] considerably.” “No”, said [Hamad] (ibid.). The exchange surrounding the event is telling. The prosecuting lawyer denied the ontological claim of racialized groups and their racial experience through recourse to pathologies and ideologies in a way that is characteristic of Goldberg’s description of postraciality which erodes the connectivity of racial groups and upholds a “neoliberal



spirit” that individualizes responsibility (Williams 2021). The defendant actively challenged the narrative of extremism and radicalization. As Mr Hamad sensed in the questioning, that his experiences of racialization were being inscribed within a broader configuration of knowledge-power that rendered exclusion and Muslim anger as wedded to violence and fanaticism, he sought to deny the category of radicalization as an explanation for his actions. The defendant’s adamant denial sought to diffuse the individualizing categories of blasphemy, radicalization, and Islamist extremism. The defendant tried to express this excess of violence beyond his religion but he was locked into the “frames of war” (Butler 2009) of domestic terrorism that inscribed his actions into a model of radicalization and fanaticism that he could not escape.

Theorists of hate as an emotion have distinguished between hatred as that which emerges from the experience of gross violations, that is, the “victim’s hate of the perpetrator” (Johansen 2015, p. 51), and the hatred of whole moral categories of people. What kind of hate was the defendant being accused of when the prosecuting lawyer stated that the “rumour of the insult to the Prophet, was something that angered you and burned within you for a long time?” When the prosecuting lawyer referred to rage, he was doing more than suggesting an emotional response to the offence. He was suggesting that Mr Hamad’s reaction was deeper than the emotion of anger or indignation directed towards a wrongdoing, and he was seeking to hold the purported offenders accountable for their violation. The lawyer was insinuating that the attacker was fixated on “being rather than doing” (Johansen 2015, p. 51), which has resonance with ethnic, racial, and genocidal hatred rather than a moral indignation in response to moral injury (cf. Mahmood 2013, p. xx). The refusal to accept the category of rage is a refusal to accept the accusations that the actions of violence involved a fixation on a hated Other, a “fossilized” (Johansen 2015, p. 51) hate, and a dehumanization of the Other, in this case, of entire categories of people as understood through abstracted accounts of radicalization in the objects of “the West” or “secular values”.

Neither form of hatred, hatred towards *doing* (“reactive hatred”) or hatred towards *being*, are generally acceptable in modern liberal contexts and are seen as something that needs to be challenged and overcome (Johansen 2015, p. 51). However, there is a short step of this evaluation of anger and violence to terrorist violence that reinforces a Manichean “us” versus “them” view of violent extremism and that shares features with Aristotle’s characteristics of hatred as hatred of entire categories or classes of people (Johansen 2015, p. 51). Mr Hamad’s refusal to accept the terms of the accusations by the prosecuting lawyer was a refusal to accept his hate as a genocidal hate of the West and Western values or to accept the ensuing fate of being assigned an extremist. Anger is a category that is performing the work of pathologizing action as extremist. This type of hate disregards other explanations of hate, including those anchored in the personal histories of individuals, broader social histories, and the immediacies of prison contexts.

If we follow the development of studies of emotions that seek to locate emotions beyond the individual and to recognize that emotions are not private or detached from broader social contexts, we can ask what the language of rage services. There is a mutual codeterminacy of hate when considering “politics of hate” or “hateful State organization” where structures and politics are founded upon identifying threatening or evil Others (Johansen 2015, p. 52). Individualizing hatred services the exclusionary State practices of marginalizing ethnic and religious minorities through the problematic category of the fanatic. This is not to “blame the victim” when violence occurs, nor is it to suggest that the victim is to necessarily transform their pain and harm into political identities reflective of a “wound culture” (Brown 1995). Rather, my contention is that by listening to violence we can be opened up to seeing the wider contextual surroundings within which violence dwells.

The brief trial excerpt leaves us empty-handed in seeking to identify motives. However, identifying motives is just the sort of psychologization of violence that fails to recognize violence within uneven and fractious affective economies. I am in agreement with Sara

Ahmed who argues for “listening to the affects and effects of hate and hate crime as a way of calling into question, rather than assuming the relationship between violence and identity” (Ahmed 2001, p. 361). There is no closed loop from injury to violence, or from offence to retaliation.

Violence as critique is more than simply the disenfranchised body lashing out against the oppressor. Violence, as scholars critical of hate crimes argue, is part of affective economies: affect is circulating and uneven, and it can become “stuck” on particular people and groups within an “economy of difference” (Ahmed 2001, p. 362) and can be given salience in particular places and contexts (Williams 2020). As Bauman (1989) argued, violence is not anomalous to modernity or bureaucratic and institutional processes; *violence is intrinsic to those processes*. Violence is part of an “enabling environment” (Perry 2001, p. 175). Suggesting that violence is bounded to a subject, to individuals, and to particular bodies pathologizes violence, masking both the politics and power relations behind that psychologization of bodies and the circulating ways that violence flows through harmful and forceful exclusion.

### 5. Conclusions: Is Violence Critique?

I have not tried to *explain* the specific episodes of violence arising from the diverse instances of violence surrounding blasphemy as this task is often accompanied by the psychologization of the Muslim Other. Instead, I have taken the cue from the volume *Is Critique Secular?* to open up the contingent conditions within which judgements are made. Through the example of prison violence and an excerpt from an attempted murder trial, I argued that the psychologization of violence reflects the ambitions of secular powers to quell religious passions, and I argued for an urgent need to rethink violence as extending beyond the bounded fanatical body in order draw attention to the wider contexts in which violence occurs.

I sought to listen to the words of Mr Hamad in his defense in the trial, who, in my reading, pointed to the ways in which affect and violence are located in the wider, circulating economies of the racial state and the security apparatus that sought to inscribe Muslim rage within the models of radicalization that reinforced “value clashes”. His efforts to extricate himself from these frames of domestic war failed. Turning the question around, from the individual’s motives to wider societal and state contexts does not exonerate responsibility. However, rethinking the location of critique is pivotal to understanding the processes within which violences interpenetrate. My focus on an episode of violence following “blasphemy” in the criminal justice system provided a focused point for meditating on how violence is embedded in interactions and encounters between the State and its citizens.

Violence sometimes does prompt institutional and state introspection and structural critique. Violence on the self, through suicide and self-harm among certain persons and groups (e.g., First Nations in Canada and Australia) whilst in custody, receives waves of public and political attention. However, violence of the type described in this paper is categorized differently in the public imagination and is reflective of the secular rationalities of “religious” violence. The accompanying affects and political stakes that direct attention away from the responsibility of the State and towards the body and mind of the fanatic drown out the economies of mutually reinforcing violence.

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