

6 October 2003

Prof. Paul Kurtz
Chairman and Founder
The Council for Secular Humanism
Buffalo, New York.

Dear Prof. Kurtz,

As you know, I was an invited speaker at the Council for Secular Humanism's conference in Washington DC in April 2003. I enjoyed meeting you and some of your colleagues at the Council, have read your books with admiration, applaud your call for a "Planetary Humanism", and was heartened by your principled public opposition to America's war against Iraq. However, as I made evident in my public remarks at the Conference, as well as to you personally, I was much distressed by speeches expressing intense hatred and hostility against Muslims. One speaker (Armen Saganian) went so far as to advocate their violent elimination. I was and remain disturbed by the Council's continued association with – and active promotion of – individuals who associate themselves with the extreme right-wing chorus in the United States that bays for Muslim and Arab blood.

I am moved to write this to you now because of one such person, Ibn Warraq, a member of your Council and a speaker at the Washington conference. In an outrageous and disgraceful op-ed published in the Wall Street Journal (Sept 29, 2003) Ibn Warraq attacked Professor Edward Said of Columbia University, who passed away recently. Warraq shamelessly accuses Professor Said of "intellectual terrorism" and fomenting Muslim rage. It is hard to imagine a greater slur against a man who was among the finest of people and a humanist to his core.

I knew Edward Said for about 15 years and considered him an exemplary figure. As you know, he spent much of his life advocating the right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination. He did so while acknowledging the reality of the Jewish people and the Holocaust. In a 1999 essay in The New York Times he wrote that "There can be no reconciliation unless both peoples, two communities of suffering, resolve that their existence is a secular fact, and that it has to be dealt with as such." In 1999 Edward, together with the Israeli citizen Daniel Barenboim, arranged for Wagner's music to be taught to Palestinian students in the occupied West Bank and thus created the award-winning West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. For Edward "humanism is the only, and I would go as far as to say the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history."

And Warraq? Best known for his book "Why I Am Not A Muslim", he has done little more than replicate Bertrand Russell's arguments for deserting Christianity. But he is no Russell. Russell openly and honestly stood up for secular politics, peace, justice, and humanism as universal principles, applying them consistently in every situation. Thus, Russell opposed his own country's wars and his country's nuclear weapons as well as the wars and weapons of others. Warraq is blinded by his hate of Muslims. Roundly

condemning the use of religion in the Islamic world, he is silent about the political uses of Christianity and Judaism as he scurries around to curry favor with the neo-conservatives and the Christian-Right in the White House. I hear not a squeak from him about the United States having organized the great Global Jihad in Afghanistan to combat the godless Soviet Union, the success of which brought to us Osama bin Laden and his fellow jihadists. Nor do I find mention of the systematic and deliberate subversion of secular governments in Muslim states by the United States, or the unstinting support that it provided to Islamic fundamentalist states such as Saudi Arabia until 9-11. I have looked at Warraq's writings in vain to seek reference to the messianic Judaism that drives Israel's unrelenting expansion, and the construction of the world's largest concentration camp with an apartheid wall that is 25 feet high, five feet thick and 350 kilometers long.

This opens a larger issue – the meaning of humanism in the context of today's world, and the definition of a humanist. Surely a humanist – both in my definition and yours – resolutely rejects the role of religion in public life and affairs of the state; rejects the role of political and religious ideology in determining personal ethics and morality; rejects the notion of supernatural interference in determining physical phenomena; and affirms the right of individuals to make their own choices informed by reason. Even as I write to you from Islamabad, I am fully aware of the enormous import each of these carries within the context of my environment. But, while these are necessary conditions for being a humanist, they are surely insufficient.

In my opinion the very first, and most fundamental, premise for a humanist is to accept that all human life – whether Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu or of whichever nationality and race – is equally valuable. This must be accompanied by the belief that rational critical thought is the essence to living a civilized, human, existence. These two premises, if taken seriously, do not allow humanists to join the ranks marching in the insane war of civilizations being fomented equally by some in the US and in the Muslim world. Rather, humanists must follow the lead given by Edward Said, when he invited us and challenged us to “concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together”.

If your conference and Ibn Warraq are any indications, American humanism is facing a growing crisis. In these difficult times, reflection, rational argument and moral principles appears to be too heavy a burden for some. They prefer the easy refuge of American exceptionalism and, for their own narrow and selfish reasons, they are eager to help make people into demons and support the use of force and violence. I urge you and your colleagues to begin a wide ranging and sustained public reflection about what you understand humanism to be, to consider carefully who your Council embraces a humanist, and to confront those whose actions undermine the foundations of humanism.

Sincerely yours.

Pervez Hoodbhoy
Professor of Physics

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Islamabad 45320, Pakistan.

KURTZ REPLIES:

October 9, 2003

Dear Pervez Hoodbhoy:

May I thank you for your letter about Ibn Warraq. We always take your views very seriously. We appreciate your fine efforts on behalf of understanding between Islamic countries and the Western world. Permit me, then, to lay your fears to rest. First of all, Ibn Warraq's letter was to the Wall Street Journal, not Free Inquiry or some other outlet sponsored by the Council for Secular Humanism. We cannot be held responsible for the views of somebody in another journal. Whether we agree or disagree with Ibn Warraq on the issue of Edward Said, surely, he is at liberty to advance his argument. Ibn Warraq's role as a Research Fellow of the Center for Inquiry does not require him to submit all his material for approval before publication. No reputable research institute operates like that.

Regarding the expression of different opinions at the Washington conference panel, surely this is what panels are for. It is generally understood that the host organization is not to be held responsible for all the opinions expressed at a forum they organize. Conference panels are designed to provide a range of opinions on any particular issue, have them articulated effectively and for the audience to leave the panel better informed as a result. In this, the panel was a success. That some opinions expressed were unhelpful is an integral part of the process. In any case, Armen Saginian's points were criticized at the time by Bill Cooke, the Center's International Director. It is also important to note that Ibn Warraq's views were among the more moderate on that panel. Concerning the Iraq war, it is true that editors of Free Inquiry came out strongly against the preemptive strike by the USA in Iraq. We did, however, allow dissenting op-ed points of view. And Christopher Hitchens and Edward Tabash, for example, supported the war.

You offer a pretty comprehensive, indeed ad hominem, attack on Ibn Warraq. You only mention *Why I am Not A Muslim*, accusing him of fomenting hatred against Muslims. If this were true, it is inconceivable that he would have been able to secure permission to use the works of widely respected scholars for the four edited works which followed *Why I am Not a Muslim* (which you don't mention). This includes *What the Koran Really Says*, *The Origins of the Koran*, and *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*. And surely, if his work was based on malevolence as you claim, this would have been mentioned in the recent *Times Literary Supplement* article by Oxford University's Chase Robinson. In fact, this does not happen, and Warraq's work is praised for the positive contribution to Islamic renewal we believe it is. Mr. Warraq has every right to reject his former Muslim beliefs and to express his dissenting views. Surely Christians, Hindus,

and Jews have the right to believe or not-in democratic societies. Why should not Muslims be permitted freedom of conscience, a human right?

Surely it is unfair to look for condemnations of American foreign policy, or Christian and Jewish triumphalism in Warraq's work. His books are about the foundations of Islam, a different subject entirely. We would seek in vain for observations on the aesthetic trends of German art in your professional writing, but only because we would be looking in the wrong place for such material. And incidentally, much of the material you say you can't find in Warraq's work is dealt with elsewhere. For instance the issue of secularism in Malaysia was aired in *Free Inquiry*, (Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 54), as are many strong criticisms of the United States' foreign policy.

The work Ibn Warraq is doing, just like the work you are doing, is invaluable to the ongoing project of encouraging a reformation of Islam. Ibn Warraq is no more motivated by a hatred of Islam than you are. And if you disagree with him on his assessment of Edward Said, well take the issue up with our blessing. But we see no reason to "consider carefully who [the] Council embraces as a humanist" or to "confront those whose actions undermine the foundations of humanism." Humanism is about encouraging the spirit of inquiry, not shutting it down. Hopefully this dispute can run its course as a legitimate academic dispute over a thinker's legacy and not descend into a series of personal animosities.

Sincerely yours,

-Paul Kurtz
Chairman

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