

That Joke isn't Funny Anymore: *Bass Mat Watan's Nasrallah Skit and the limits of laughter in Lebanon*

By Sune Haugbolle

October, 2007. Shafiq was certainly not the kind of television host Lebanese viewers would expect to see interviewing a major political figure. Dressed as a woman and with a silly, effeminate voice a la Mickey Mouse, he was anything but the image of a serious TV presenter. So it would be all the more startling for Lebanese audiences to witness this newscaster host the most controversial political leader of them all: Hizbullah head Hassan Nasrallah. But this is what they were apparently witnessing as they switched to Lebanese satellite channel LBC on 1 June 2006. Shafiq welcomes the viewers to the show and remarks that some people might be surprised to see Hassan Nasrallah beside him, to which Nasrallah retorts: "Why would people say that? Has anyone said that we [Hizbullah] eat people?" "Well," says Shafiq, "every time Your Honor appears in the media, you say, 'we will chop off their hands, break their necks and grind their stomachs.'" "That's tactics, Shafiq, part of the balance of terror," Nasrallah explains with a wave of his hand. "Do people think that we will open a butcher shop and sell ground meat and hamburgers?" Nasrallah wraps up the interview declaring that Hizbullah will not lay down its weapons after liberating the Shebaa Farms,¹ but will instead move on to its next target: the occupied territories of Abu Hassan, a Lebanese in Detroit, whose Jewish American neighbor has invaded his garden.²

The five minutes long interview was of course a joke. But as the most controversial offering from popular Lebanese comedy show *Bass Mat Watan (BMW)*, the sketch was to have repercussions that prove comedy is about more than just making viewers laugh. Having said that, the sketch might have been overlooked had it not been for the context of heightened political tension in Lebanon in which it was aired. Many Lebanese I have talked to agree that it was nothing more or less than the usual fare of *BMW*'s trademark political satire. Others found the lacuna between real-life Nasrallah and the silliness of his claims in the sketch extremely hilarious. Clearly going to lengths to subvert Hizbullah's discourse, the sketch could be taken as insensitive by those who share Hizbullah's political views. Though the charge of insensitivity is a common refrain in the highly charged atmosphere of Lebanese politics, many argue some measure of offense is in the nature of political satire if it is to have any impact at all.

Nasrallah's supporters begged to differ. They were outraged that LBC, a station widely seen as "Christian" in Lebanon,³ was making fun of their leader and took particular offence at the joke about Abu Hassan in Detroit. Many Lebanese Shiites live in Detroit and the reference smacked of sectarian stereotyping. Moreover, the prod about the UN Security Council's Resolution 1559 that calls for Hizbullah to disarm made the group's supporters see red. Hours after the show had been aired scores of young men took to the streets in Beirut's southern suburbs, blocking the road to Beirut International Airport and burning tires. The protests continued through the night and at one point threatened to spread to downtown Beirut. The following day Sharbil Khalil, the producer of *BMW*, made a public apology and stated that he

respected Nasrallah and did not mean to offend. The real Hassan Nasrallah intervened to calm his cohorts and break up the riots.

The event set off a flurry of counter-accusations, with many alleging that Hizbullah orchestrated the violence as a show of force. Among the critics was Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel, who claimed that the riots were meant to intimidate Lebanon's Christian community.⁴ Nasrallah denied the charges, saying the protests were spontaneous and exaggerated by anti-Syrian politicians.⁵ Although the violence did not escalate beyond street riots, the affair left a widespread sense of despair over the widening gap in understanding among Lebanon's sects in the ongoing crisis triggered by the death of Rafiq Al Hariri in 2005. About a month after the sketch was aired, Hizbullah would be involved in fighting a devastating onslaught from Israel. Tensions would remain high in the aftermath of the war and Gemayel would be assassinated later that November.

Beyond being a colorful incident in the political saga of post-Syria Lebanon, the *BMW* affair makes an interesting example of how and when political satire transgress accepted norms in the public realm.⁶ Often ignored as mere play or entertainment, comedy is, I argue, fertile ground for sociological analysis. This is because a sociological enquiry into comedy and humor allows for a unique insight into the red lines between sanctioned speech and that which is deemed unacceptable in a national culture.⁷ In this short article I investigate the social functions of humor in Lebanon, and argue that the *BMW* affair illustrates fundamental changes to public discourse and sensitivities in the period after 2005.

Social functions of humor

Humor serves a variety of social functions. It can be a safety valve for pent-up frustrations and emotions, and in particular for things that cannot otherwise be stated publicly. As Sharbil Khalil has said about *BMW*, “our satire has become an outlet. By tuning in, Lebanese compensate for their sense of powerlessness, and the fact that they are not masters of their own destinies.”⁸ In this view, humor touches on the commonalities of the national imagination. In Lebanon’s case, this imagination is rich with widely held complaints ripe for contentious critique: the corruption of political leaders who thrive on sectarianism as a political and socio-economic system of control and patronage; the disunity of Lebanon’s diverse population; and the weakness of the Lebanese state, easily penetrable by more powerful neighbors. Just like the Pierrot figure that adorns the logo of *BMW*, the characters on the show often do not know whether to cry or to laugh. This is reflected in the show’s name, a double entendre, which can either be read as “but a nation died” (*bass mat watan*) or, “smiles of a nation” (*basmat watan*), depending on the pronunciation. The underlying premise is that Lebanon is a mess, but hey, you’ve got to laugh about it.

However, pent-up frustrations can also be directed humorously against particular social groups and taboos surrounding them. As I have argued elsewhere, much of the hilarity and carnival-like atmosphere in the demonstrations in downtown Beirut between February and April, 2005 – known in Lebanon as the “Independence Intifada” – can be explained as bottled up frustrations, accumulated during thirty years of Syrian rule over Lebanon, which were finally given free rein in public space and speech.⁹ By employing Syrian stereotypes in the context of demonstrations and

agitation, subversion was automatically politicized. The politicization of humor and stereotypes in the tense atmosphere of post-Syria Lebanon offers one explanation why the Nasrallah skit triggered such violent protests.

But this type of humor also has potential to backfire. While it is a relief to some, others may read it as a claim to superiority, a laugh on a certain social group or the less culturally or economically powerful. In a Lebanese context, this sort of humor is often framed in terms of sectarian identity and culture. Crude stereotyping of social groups normally takes place well outside the public realm. Particularly, the jokes Lebanese tell about other sects can be virulent, mean, and sometimes racist. The *BMW* sketch did contain sectarian references, like the typical Shiite name Abu Hassan, which in the context of the sketch implied that Hizbullah is not the “national liberation party” it claims to be, but a sectarian group like any other in Lebanon. Certainly, many Hizbullah supporters interpreted the Nasrallah skit “culturally” as a malicious joke designed – by a Maronite Christian TV station, to make matters worse – to humiliate not just a political party and its leader but a part of the Lebanese population. Whether intended or not, at least a part of Lebanon’s population perceived the *BMW* skit to have transgressed the red line that separates privately held prejudices and publicly sanctioned speech.

The limits of laughter

That people overstep red lines and others react violently to humor are relatively new phenomena in Lebanon related to radical changes in inter-sectarian relations and public discourse after 2005. Since the emergence of mass media as part

of everyday life for the majority of the population in the 1950s, genres such as comedy films, cartoons and TV and radio shows have generated mass mediated humor through which the limits of publicly sanctioned laughter are constantly renegotiated. Another very popular genre from this period which is still in vogue today is revue cabarets, often lightweight subversions of social norms and famous people, which are staged in theatres around the country and involve singing and dancing.

Perhaps more importantly, there is the time-honored *nukta* (joke) that finds its way into public discourse now and then but is mainly designed to be told and retold among people and which, crucially, does not adhere to the same sanctions of proper speech as do cultural productions. In fact, the whole point of the *nukta* is often to say things that public culture would censor or self-censor. An example of this genre is the famous Abu Abed (*Abu al-`Abd*) jokes about a male chauvinist, half-witted but likable *ibn al-balad* (a man who is “salt of the earth”). These jokes have a long history and are solidly inscribed in national culture.¹⁰ Some of the classical Abu Abed stories vary little from similar Little Johnny jokes in the U.S., or Homsî jokes in Syria, while others play on specifics of Lebanese culture and politics. Here is an example of a recent one, in which Abu Abed and his sidekick Abu Steif join the “Independence Intifada:”

Abu Abed and his friend Abu Steif were amongst the protester in a tent in Sahat al-Hurriya [Freedom Square, the name given to Martyrs’ Square downtown Beirut during the protests in 2005]. In the middle of the night Abu Abed woke up and started shaking Abu Steif.

Abu Abed: Abu Steif...Abu Steif wake up... and tell me what you see.... Do you see what I see?

Abu Steif: I can see the sky... I can see the moon... I can see the stars...!

Abu Abed: And what does this mean to you?

Abu Steif: This means "Freedom"... This means "Sovereignty"... This means "Independence"... [*Hurriya, Siyada, Istiqlal*, slogan of the "March 14" movement].

Abu Abed: Come on you stupid jerk... Wake up... This means "Our tent was stolen ...!"

Without straying from the classical dead-pan formula, the joke makes gentle fun of pompous political rhetoric. Abu Abed jokes are generally self-deflating and therefore rather harmless – although some can be raunchy. Abu Abed jokes are for everyone and rarely take on sectarian dimensions, other than in a gentle way, as in the joke where Abu Steif asks Abu Abed what the difference is between Nancy Ajram, a glamorous Lebanese pop singer known for her multiple plastic surgeries, and Hizbullah. Abu Abed replies, "Of course, Nancy did a lot more operations than Hizbullah." The underlying premise of this genre is that all Lebanese are a little bit like Abu Abed and the characters in his jokes. Abu Abed therefore denotes a sort of all-inclusive, cross-sectarian *kulluna lil-watan* nationalism.¹¹

As a rule, humor in cultural production in post-war Lebanon (1990-2005) more closely resembled the disarming Abu Abed jokes than the virulent rhetoric of the Independence Intifada. The Lebanese and Syrian security apparatuses made open critique of leading politicians difficult, and satire with sectarian overtones was unheard of. Instead, as Lebanese comedian Andre Gideon has put it, the majority of Lebanese humor both during the civil war¹² and afterwards urged "the Lebanese to laugh at themselves through their history of blood and tears."¹³ Critique of religious and political leaders existed, but was heavily impeded by the dominant role played by Syrian intelligence services in Lebanese politics, and by public sensitivities following

the Lebanese civil war particularly in matters related to sectarian animosities and stereotypes. Comedy reflected this reality and often addressed perceived national traits and stereotypes of the post-war period, such as greed, mercantilism, life in the fast lane, and a general “sleazy lebanezy” penchant for superficiality, money and good looks.

New openness

The imperative to not mention anything that could disturb or upset sectarian relations – enshrined in a media law passed in 1994 – was adhered to both in politics and in media, including comedy genres. *BMW*, which first appeared on LBC in 1993, made a name for itself by being the first to routinely make light of touchy issues, including poking fun at political leaders.¹⁴ In the 1990s and early 2000s, the show became widely appreciated for its daring critique of the Lebanese political class and its close links to Damascus. After the Syrians left in 2005, the skits have turned to showing the hypocrisy of “national leaders” who are all in one way or another sponsored by the Syrians. In recent years, other programs have followed *BMW*'s lead with political satire that has become more daring and incrementally more popular. Widespread fatigue with the political class and its rhetoric has found an outlet in TV satire and greatly increased its number of viewers. Today, televised comedy shows are among the most watched TV productions in Lebanon, and weekly shows can be found on several of Lebanon's domestic TV stations, including the ironically titled *Irbat Tinhal* (It Will Be Resolved Soon) on New TV and *La Yumal* (Never Boring) on Future TV. *BMW* in 2007 even beats the ratings of standard political talk shows such as *Kalam al-Nas* (People's Talk) on LBC.¹⁵

One of the regular figures of fun on all comedy shows since 2005 has been Rustum Ghazala, Syria's long-time *mukhabarat* head in Lebanon, whose name once inspired fear among leaders and normal people alike. In particular, Future TV's *La Yumal* has specialized in sketches making fun of Ghazala, Syrian *mukhabarat*, and Syrians more generally. Jokes about Syrians are nothing new in Lebanon. During the 1990s a whole category of "Swiss" jokes – Swiss being a thinly disguised pseudonym for Syrian – circulated in Lebanon.¹⁶ Swiss jokes still exist but were undoubtedly more potent in the 1990s, when it was difficult to otherwise critique Syria's political dominance in Lebanon. These jokes were meant to take revenge on the powerful but unsophisticated Syrian soldiers and agents by painting them as idiots. At the same time Swiss jokes took the sting out of the Lebanese' own fear by exposing it. In one such joke, a Lebanese walks up to a policeman and says "Sir, a Swiss stole my Syrian gold watch." "Surely, you mean that a Syrian stole your Swiss gold watch?" the officer asks, to which the man replies: "You said that, not I!"

The Independence Intifada introduced a new range of Swiss jokes that emphasized the worst stereotypes of Syrians as uncultured, uncivilized "others" who were to blame for Lebanon's problems.¹⁷ The novelty was not in the type of jokes and caricatures, but rather in the audacity to use this sort of crude mockery as part of political discourse. Since early 2005, this audacity has slowly entrenched itself in public culture, not just with regard to "the Swiss," but also concerning the Lebanese themselves, their political leaders and their inter-sectarian relations. As a result, satire is now generally more daring, pushing the boundaries of what can be openly stated about society and politics.

The new openness may be a relief to many but has also had less positive effects. In the semi-public space of the internet, YouTube skits posted by young Lebanese since the 2006 War between Israel and Hizbullah now deal in extremely explicit sectarian stereotyping and sexual debasement aimed against opponents in the ongoing political stand-off.¹⁸ Moreover, in conjunction with the polarization of the political scene that it is meant to subvert, political satire has in some instances become polarized itself. Sharbil Khalil has revealed in an interview that the board of LBC, who have well-know sympathies and links with the Christian party The Lebanese Forces, do not allow *BMW* to air sketches about LF leader Samir Ja'ja'.¹⁹ This does not mean that members of the *BMW* team necessarily share these political leanings. On the contrary, Sharbil Khalil is known to favor Michel Aoun, a Maronite leader currently allied in parliament with Hizbullah against the March 14th movement. However, it does mean that TV channels monitor their satire programs closely and weed out sketches deemed to be out of political line. One will not find the Hariri-owned Future TV's *La Yumal* grossly caricaturing Saad Hariri, although he has indeed figured in sketches. *BMW*'s Hassan Nasrallah skit may have overstepped the limits of publicly condoned laughing matters, but in doing so it only exposed an already existing trend towards humor being used, even if unintended, as fodder in political contention.

Humor as secular criticism?

A common reaction among Lebanese opposed to Hizbullah was that the *BMW* affair exposed the group's inability to laugh at itself, or better, to respond to humor

with humor, while some thought that it showed Hizbullah's failure to separate religion from politics. Other people I talked to in Beirut went further and saw humor and satire as necessarily linked to openness and self-criticism in Middle Eastern societies.²⁰

These reactions are interesting because they resonate with debates during the recent Danish cartoons affair, another instance where a joke on religious authority suddenly wasn't funny anymore. The discursive overlaps between the two incidents are hardly coincidental, as the Nasrallah skit came on the heels of the September 2005 crisis triggered by eleven cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper. The reactions in Lebanon therefore naturally inscribed themselves in current debates about secularism, religious tolerance, liberalism, freedom of speech and subversion in the contemporary world that were triggered by the cartoon crisis and raged around the world for months in early 2006.

Being Danish, I followed the Muhammad cartoons saga with a mix of bemusement and horror, both over the cartoons and the reaction to them. I found myself uncomfortable with those who wanted the drawings condemned and withdrawn by the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish authorities, but also ill at ease with those who seized uncritically on the cartoons as symbols of the freedom to subvert religious authority. Clearly, there was more at stake, particularly in the context of failed integration of Muslim immigrants in Denmark and Europe, latent racism and increasing miscommunication between cultural groups that surrounded the whole affair. Many Muslims had reacted angrily because they already felt targeted by secular intolerance from Danes who, for example, questioned their right to wear headscarves in public. Similarly in 2006, it occurred to me that many of my Lebanese friends reacted to the *BMW* affair as if it had happened out of context, in particular the

context of existing stereotypical discourses about Shiites, Hizbullah, the southern suburbs of Beirut known as the *Dahiya*, and the long history of these discourses in Lebanon.²¹ In both cases, structural problems of cohabitation between religious groups and social stigmas formed the backdrop to the singular incidents of humorous transgression.

Of course freedom of speech and subversion form part of a critical political culture, but one should not be blind to the political subtexts with which humor is employed. In the Middle East today, certain ideas of irony and subversion have become part of an idiom of liberalism, individualism and modernity that takes its cue from the West. According to this idiom, the ability to mock political authority demonstrates a democratic attitude, whereas the ability to make fun of religious authority is an indicator of secularism. The use of this idiom of humor-as-secular modernity was already evident in the 2005 demonstrations in downtown Beirut, where signs and banners were packed with subversive, ironic statements about the Shiite political camp and its Syrian backers, phrased in a “hip” global-generation language designed to portray the – largely urban middle-class – demonstrators as modern, international, educated young people.²² Needless to say, the “secular” attitude of many of these protestors from Christian, Sunni and Druze parties is highly questionable. The same idiom was heavily employed in the Muhammad cartoons affair by some Danish commentators who urged Muslims to start laughing at themselves in order to demonstrate that they were, or wanted to be, part of Danish, modern secular society.²³ The subtext here is, in both cases, infused with assumptions about the inability of Muslims to modernize, and of Shiites to integrate into Beirut and Lebanon as a whole.²⁴

These claims do not stand the test of a closer analysis of Muslim responses to the crisis. Rather than challenging the principles of the secular public sphere in Denmark, Danish Muslims at large affirmed these principles during the cartoons controversy by demanding an apology from those responsible for the caricatures, not so much because of the insult to the prophet per se, but because they saw the publication as a deliberate and unprovoked attack on Muslim religious feelings. They asked for those responsible to be prosecuted, not on the grounds of Sharia, but according to existing limitations to freedom of speech enshrined in Danish laws of blasphemy and hate speech.²⁵ Hence, hate speech should not be confused with secularism or a liberal attitude. While liberalism certainly entails freedom of speech, the way in which that freedom is exercised and administered is a crucial benchmark for how liberal the society in question is. The challenge is to defend liberalism and its values, but also condemn abuse that undermines them. Liberal values can never be taken as given but are established through such debates as the cartoons affair.

The Middle East is not Scandinavia and Lebanon is not Denmark, but there are nevertheless illustrative similarities between the cartoon and *BMW* affairs. As in Denmark, freedom of speech is restricted in Lebanon, by a law that prohibits mocking the head of state and religious leaders. Legally speaking, *BMW* was therefore in the wrong because Hassan Nasrallah is a Shiite *Sayyid*, or descendant of the prophet Muhammad, a fact Sharbil Khalil acknowledged in his apology. At the same time, Hizbullah's supporters also violated legal norms by threatening violence. Each side overstepped a legal and unwritten consensus and thereby undermined liberal values in the public sphere. Sadly, disrespect and violence is what each side of the political

fence that divides Lebanon in 2007 expects from the other. After the Hizbullah skit affair, after two years of political crisis and paralysis, and in particular after last summer's war, one would think that the Lebanese have little left to laugh about. But it will take more than political gridlock, violence and mounting sectarianism to wipe the smiles off their faces. They have been there before and will keep smiling, even if it will have to be through tears.

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¹ Territory of disputed ownership located on the border between Lebanon and the Golan Heights. Since Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in May, 2000, Hizbullah has vowed to liberate the Shebaa Farms. The area is therefore widely seen as a means for Hizbullah to continue its conflict with Israel. The joke plays on what many people see as an insignificant and small area that is not much more important than a "garden" somewhere.

² The skit can be watched online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUCIAd3-Z1A>.

³ When LBC started in 1985 as the first private TV station in Lebanon, it was owned by the Christian militia *The Lebanese Forces*. Today, the ownership is more mixed and shareholders include Muslim Lebanese, Saudis and other foreigners. The satellite channel, LBCI, is popular in the entire Arab world. Still, LBC continues to be perceived as primarily the voice of Lebanon's Christian population. See Nabil Dajani, "The Changing Scene of Lebanese Television," in *Transnational Broadcast Studies* 7 (2001).

⁴ Quoted in *Al-Nahar*, 5/6, 2006.

⁵ Quoted by AFP, 6/6, 2006.

⁶ This question has mostly been investigated in the context of Arab state censorship (see for example Amin, Hussein: *Freedom as a Value in Arab Media*, in *Political Communication*, 19 (2), 2002, pp. 125-135). In Lebanon where the state is relatively weak and free media have a long history, self-censorship and public sensitivities become more vital fields of inquiry than those concerned with state-society relations.

⁷ Humor in the Middle East has largely been examined through the lens of nationalist humor, with the notable exception of an interesting body of research in French about the diversity of humor in the Ottoman Empire and its relations to ethnic identities. See Francois Georgeon, "Rire dans l'empire ottomane?," *Révue de la Méditerranée et du Monde Musulman* 77-78 (1995).

⁸ Quoted in Salim Yassine, "Lebanese Seek Smiles from Political Satire," *Middle East Online*, 10/4, 2007. <http://www.meo.tv/english/?id=20326=20326&format=0>.

⁹ Sune Haugbolle, "Spatial Transformations in the Lebanese 'Independence Intifada'," *Arab Studies Journal* 12, no. 3 (2006).

¹⁰ For a selection of Abu Abed jokes, see <http://www.abuabed.net/>. A recent female counterpart are the so-called Hayfa jokes, named after singer Hayfa Wahba. See <http://www.hayfajokes.com/>.

¹¹ “We All Belong to the Nation.” The Lebanese national anthem, and a signifier of cross-sectarian nationalism.

¹² Ziad Rahbany’s plays *Shi Fashil* (What a Shame) and *Film Amriky Tawil* (Long American Movie) are excellent examples of dark, but very witty war-time humor. See Elise Adib Salem, *Constructing Lebanon - A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), 148-151. The TV comedy series *Mu’allima wa Ustadh* (Mr and Mrs Teacher) was shown on the national TV station Télé Liban in the 1980s exemplifies a simpler form of humor that plays on national traits. More recent TV comedies of the same genre include *Marti wa Ana* (My wife and I) on LBCI and *Abu Riyad* on Future TV.

¹³ Quoted in Salim Yassine, “Lebanese Seek Smiles from Political Satire.”

¹⁴ See *BMW*’s homepage,

<http://www.lbcgroup.tv/LBC/En/MainMenu/Programs/Program+Details.htm?ID=34&CatID=7>.

¹⁵ Salim Yassine, “Lebanese Seek Smiles from Political Satire.”

¹⁶ A selection of “Swiss” jokes can be read at <http://www.cedarseed.com/water/lebhumeur.html>.

¹⁷ For examples of anti-Syrian jokes and expressions in the Independence Intifada, see Sune Haugbolle, “Spatial Transformations in the Lebanese ‘Independence Intifada’.” *Arab Studies Journal* 12, no. 3 (2006).

¹⁸ See for example http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff_LFW5N2uE.

¹⁹ Sharbil Khlil interviewed in Habib Battah, “Laughing Through Crisis,” in *Journal of Middle East Broadcasters*, 10, January-February (2007).

http://www.mebjournal.com/component/option,com_magazine/func,show_article/id,300/.

²⁰ Interviews and conversations in Beirut, May, 2007.

²¹ See Mona Harb, “La *Dahiye* de Beyrouth: Parcours d’une Stigmatisation Urbaine, Consolidation d’un Territoire Politique,” *Genèses* 51 (2003), 70-91.

Sune Haugbolle, “Spatial Transformations in the Lebanese ‘Independence Intifada’.” *Arab Studies Journal* 12, no. 3 (2006).

²³ Lasse Lindekilde, “Claims-making of Danish Muslims during the Muhammad Caricatures Controversy: A Challenge to the Principles of the Secular Public Sphere?” Paper given at the conference “Secularism and Beyond,” Copenhagen University, May 2007.

http://www.ku.dk/satsning/religion/sekularism_and_beyond/pdf/Lindekilde_Paper.pdf.

²⁴ For assumptions about Muslims and modernity in Lebanon and in general, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern - Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Lasse Lindekilde, “Claims-making of Danish Muslims during the Muhammad Caricatures Controversy: A Challenge to the Principles of the Secular Public Sphere?,” 25.