

HOLY PROPHET, FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND CARTOON CONTROVERSY

(Speech delivered by Atif Munawar Mir in Mississauga Mosque on March 20th, 2008)

The topic of my speech is the Holy Prophet (sa) and freedom of speech.

“He (The Holy Prophet(sa)) was the champion who restored to the world the unity of God in the extreme and his soul melted out of sympathy for mankind. Therefore, God, who knew the secret of his heart, exalted him above all the prophets...and bestowed upon him in his life-time all that he desired”.¹

These words of the Promised Messiah (as) express the love and highest regard that all of us have for the Holy Prophet (sa).

When the person whom we love and respect so much is insulted in the name of freedom of speech, such as in the case of the Danish cartoon controversy, how should we respond? Should we burn flags, carry out violent demonstrations or issue fatwas? Of course, not!. Instead it is only logical to look at the life of the Holy Prophet (sa) and seek guidance from his life and teachings. Before we draw the lessons from the life of the Holy Prophet (sa), it is important that we identify the intentions of those who support these cartoons. Towards this end, I have divided my speech in three parts:

1. What is the western perspective on the cartoon controversy?
2. What is the Islamic view on freedom of speech?
3. How should Muslims respond to this cartoon controversy?

What is the Western Perspective?

Why is it that some people consider freedom of speech a license to insult and offend? At this point, I want to say that both the North American media and the general public have acted responsibly by discouraging the publication of these cartoons.

¹ Ahmad, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam, “Holy Prophet”, Essence of Islam, London Mosque, 1979, p. 136

But some European governments, media outlets, and so-called intellectuals have been largely insensitive to Muslim sensibilities. To them, this controversy has become a contest between freedom of speech and seemingly restrictive Islamic principles. The reaction of flag burning, street violence and general destructive behavior of Muslims is regrettable. But equally regrettable is the response of these Danish journalists who respond by again publishing these cartoons under the pretense of freedom of speech.

How do Danish cartoonists defend the publication of these offensive cartoons? They insist that the publication should not be interpreted as an insult to the Holy Prophet (sa) of Islam. Instead, they argue that their goal is to advance the cause of freedom of speech. It does not matter to them whether the cartoons represent the true life of the Holy Prophet (sa) or not. What matters to them is their belief that freedom of speech should not be restricted even if it promotes falsehood and reinforces harmful stereotypes.

Would western philosophers who fought for freedom of speech in the 18th and 19th century agree with the opinion of Danish cartoonists? The answer is no.

When western philosophers advocated freedom of speech during the 18th and 19th centuries, they believed that freedom of speech would lead to truth, morality and self-fulfillment. But, unfortunately, this is not the case today.

It seems that with the passage of time, freedom of speech has become more important than truth and morality themselves. In the eyes of Danish journalists, freedom of speech overrides all other values. Once upon a time, western philosophers worshipped the idea of truth and the ritual of that worship was freedom of speech. But over time, the ritual itself has become the object of worship. In other words, the method used to discover the truth has become more important than the truth itself. As such, the Danish journalists have fallen into the same trap as religious extremists.

When attacking Islamic values, the western media often emphasizes the value of freedom of speech as if freedom of speech in their society is absolute and inviolable. That is not the case. Freedom of speech always conflicts and thus needs to be balanced with other values in the society. For example, one important value in many western countries is the peaceful coexistence of all races, religions and nationalities. Hence it is crucial that a balance is struck between freedom of speech and peaceful coexistence.

That is why modern democratic governments in one form or another, generally, recognize the need of limitations on freedom of speech. For example, the Canadian Supreme Court, in 1990, ruled under section 1 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that “limitation of free speech is justified in a democratic society. The court stated that since hate propaganda harms us all, then stopping its spread helps people from different backgrounds to live together — and may even reduce violence in Canada.”²

The free speech in the United States (US) is protected under the First Amendment. However, there are limitations that the US constitution also places on free speech. For example, hate speech and slander are not protected by First Amendment.

So far I have talked about Danish journalists who defend the publication of these cartoons in the name of freedom of speech. There are some who claim that these cartoons, in fact, are telling the truth. They claim that the Holy Prophet (sa) preached terrorism. Nothing can be farther from the truth. The Holy Prophet (sa) loved peace and held human dignity and life in the highest regard.

We don't say that they should be stopped from criticizing Islam even though they may be prejudiced or misguided by media. We do say, however, that they could express their opinions in a decent and respectful manner. The cartoons were clearly intended to mock and insult. Their purpose was neither education nor discussion. They were simply an outlet of prejudice and hatred.

What is Islamic View of Freedom of Speech

² http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/legislation/canadian_law/federal/charter_of_rights/chart_right_free_ov.cfm

In Islam, truth is held in highest regard. Islam admonishes us to tell the truth.

Allah says in the Holy Quran:

“O mankind! The Messenger has indeed come to you with truth from your Lord; believe therefore, it will be better for you. But if you disbelieve, verily, to Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and in the earth. And Allah is All-Knowing, Wise.” (4:171)

However, Islam doesn't force us to accept the truth.

Allah says: “There is no compulsion in religion. Surely, the right way has become distinct from error... (2:257)

What about those who disagree with Muslims? They have the freedom of speech to disagree with Muslims. How much disagreement does Islam allow? The following example from the Holy Prophet's (sa) life gives us an idea.

Once returning from expedition, a hypocrite used insulting words against the Holy Prophet (sa). The remarks made Muslims very upset and one Muslim even suggested that the culprit should be killed. The Holy Prophet (sa) did not permit anyone to do so.³

This incident clearly indicates to Muslims how they should respond to such incitements.

The fact that the Holy Prophet (sa) forgave those who threw stones at him, who harassed him and tortured his followers, proves that even insult to the Holy Prophet (sa) is not punishable in Islam.

These verses clearly show that Allah has granted free speech to humanity regardless of their faith but how you exercise your free speech will be judged by Allah.

The following hadiths give an idea as to what the Holy Prophet (sa) preached and practiced with respect to exercising freedom of speech:

1. “A believer does not taunt, or curse or abuse or talk indecently”.
2. “Ruined are those who exaggerate”.
3. A good word is a charity

³ Ahmad, Hadhrat Mirza Tahir, “Inter-religious Peace and Harmony”, *Islam's Response to Contemporary Issues*, Islam International Publications, 1997, p. 53-54 (Narrated by Ibn Ishaq: Al-Seera tun Nabwiyya by Ibn Hashim. Pt. III; p. 155)

In three simple sentences, the Holy Prophet (sa) has taught us the core principles of freedom of speech:

- Don't be indecent
- Don't embellish stories
- Saying good things is a virtue provided that the good things said are true.

The Danish media has violated more or less all of these three principles, which are absolutely critical to the preservation of justice and maintenance of social harmony.

Only by observing these manners, one can ensure that freedom of speech preserves justice and maintains social harmony. Given the increasingly interconnected world where societies are becoming more and more pluralistic, these values have never been more important.

In the Holy Quran, Allah says:

“Revile not those whom they call upon beside Allah, lest they, out of spite, revile Allah in their ignorance...(6:109)

What does this Verse teach us? This verse teaches us to respect others' beliefs no matter how unreasonable they may be. It also teaches that disrespect towards the belief of others will make them disrespect your beliefs and this tit for tat behavior can generate social conflicts and undermine peace.

A skeptic may argue that Muslims could use the pretense of decency, honesty and respect to continually restrict freedom of speech. This is a valid concern.

You may respond to this concern with the three following points:

1. Some western countries such as Canada and the U.S., and the United Nations all place limits on freedom of speech. So limits on freedom of speech are necessary
2. It may be argued that unchecked freedom of speech may cause the society to degenerate into anarchy. If that happens, it would unravel society wherein freedom of speech cannot exist at all.

3. Too much freedom of speech can hurt other values such as justice and peace.

Therefore, we should strike a balance between freedom of speech and other values.

The best balance is obtained when we speak what we believe in a decent manner as opposed to insulting manner.

In another verse of the Holy Quran, Allah says:

“He has already revealed to you in the Book that, when you hear the signs of Allah being denied and mocked at, sit not with them until they engage in a talk other than that; for in that case you would be like them. Surely, Allah will assemble the hypocrites and disbelievers in Hell, all together” (4: 141)

The verse says that if people are making fun of signs of Allah, then you should just walk away.

But can we walk away in today’s world? In the today’s world, the electronic media, print media, Internet etc...are being used by vested interests to propagate insult against the Holy Prophet (sa) all across the globe.

In this context, how should we read the Quranic verse which commands us to walk away from those who insult your religion? How can we walk away from these given the reach of media in today’s society? Should we just change the TV channel or radio frequency when we hear offensive remarks against the Holy Prophet (sa)? Should we just stop reading the mocking and demeaning newspaper story and do nothing?

The answer, of course, is no. The Holy Quran has merely discouraged discussion with those who are in the habit of mocking the signs of Allah. You are told to walk away from that situation.

How Should Muslims Respond?

Will these Danish cartoonists stop publishing these cartoons if we walk away?

The history says no. We have seen how some media outlets, when left unchecked, keep finding new ways to insult Prophet Jesus (pbuh). Hence, we shouldn’t sit quietly but we shouldn’t behave violently. We should make peaceful protest and make the western world

recognize that mocking and insulting remarks about the Holy Prophet (sa) does not in any way promote the cause of justice and freedom of speech. If a constitution of a country in which Muslims live does not protect the honor of Holy Prophet, then Muslims should exercise their freedom of speech to create social awareness about the love that Muslims have for the Holy Prophet (sa).

Seeking Guidance from the Holy Prophet

We saw what principles of Freedom of speech Holy Prophet taught us? But he didn't only teach us with his words. He taught us with his actions as well.

When the Holy Prophet (sa) started to preach Islam, he enjoyed zero freedom of speech. How did he transform people who ridiculed, tortured and insulted him into devoted Muslims?

He won the hearts of the people by introducing them to the attributes of Allah and convinced them by displaying those attributes of Allah in his daily life. He made them realize that the teachings of Allah when internalized into the human soul make a person so powerful and convincing that no obstacle or opposition can stand in its way.

Guidance offered by The Promised Messiah (as)

The Promised Messiah (as), whose life was, based on the teachings of Holy Quran and Sunnah, said, almost 100 years ago, that people who "vilify the Prophets of other faith...sow the seed of enmity and discord among mankind"⁴. In the end, he advocated a treaty of mutual respect between Hindus and Muslims. According to the proposed treaty, both sides were required to respect each other's faith.

So what should we do today?

May be today, as per teachings of the Promised Messiah (as), Muslims should propose a treaty with other religions that all religions should be able to preach but no insulting or derogatory remarks will be made about each other's Prophets. We can agree to disagree to disagree with manners. Since atheists don't belong to any religion, they might not see any

⁴Ahmad, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam, Message of Peace, Islam International Publications, 2007, p.32

benefit to be part of this treaty. Hopefully, they will be influenced by the sense of goodness that is going to motivate such treaty.

Guidance Offered by Khalifatul Masih V (aba)

In the context of cartoon controversy, this is the message that Khalifatul Masih V (aba) has given us. His advice to Muslims is as follows:.

“We should pray more than before, we should try and purify ourselves more than before, we should invoke blessings on the Prophet more than before.’.

So the best response to the cartoon controversy is to make ourselves better Muslims, propose a treaty with other religions and pray to Allah.

What else can be done?

Other responses are to write letters to newspapers, TV channels and columnists. We don't have access to media but we do have freedom of speech and we do have the Internet. In addition, Muslim students should write essays that educate professors and teachers about the true life of the Holy Prophet (sa) and assuming they are not prejudiced, they will pass on their knowledge to their students who are going to be the future TV anchors, columnists, editors and news writers. Even better, you should endeavor to become journalists as Khalifatul Masih IV (ra) and V (aba) have emphasized time and again. Whatever you do, don't forget the rules of speech that the Holy Prophet (sa) has taught us.

Conclusion

Freedom of speech is a noble value. But it must be exercised within the framework of decency, honesty and respect. Otherwise, freedom of speech will become a nuisance. When speech is driven by insults, it reinforces stereotypes and prejudices, which is clearly something we neither want nor can afford to have in a pluralistic society. The values taught to us by the Holy Prophet(sa) are simple but elegant which once incorporated in any setting, personal, cultural, national or international, will guide towards truth while preserving justice and promoting social harmony. Before the holocaust, insulting cartoons were drawn

dehumanizing Jews and it led to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of them. Now Danish cartoonists have painted the Holy Prophet (sa) and the whole Ummah of Islam as terrorists. It is our responsibility to dispel the myths that are being created against the Holy Prophet (sa) and Muslims. Unfortunately, the western media defines the word freedom in terms of their culture and history. Our response, as a result, tends to be reactionary or apologetic. Don't misunderstand me. Western civilization has made a great contribution to humanity on the foundations laid down by Greeks, Roman and Islamic societies. We must appreciate those contributions and absorb them into our culture as long as they don't conflict with Islam. However, as Muslims and citizens of the world, we have something to offer to the western world as well. One of the things at this juncture that we can offer is to inform them about the beautiful life and teachings of the Holy Prophet (sa). But we must carry out the discussions with the rules taught to us by the Holy Prophet (sa).

May Allah enable us to do our part in defending the honor of the Holy Prophet (sa) and convince Danish journalists to express their opinions with decency, respect and honesty.