

Muslims and Free Speech

Should there be limits to free speech and expression? The issue is now on the front burner for intellectual discussion and political decision in Western societies. This was inevitable following the events after the cold-blooded massacres in Paris at the office of *Charlie Hebdo* (CH) for images satirizing the Prophet Mohammed. Millions marched in the streets of Paris and elsewhere in solidarity with and support of CH. Yet after CH resumed publication and issued another critical cartoon of the Prophet, voices have come from different quarters over the rights and responsibilities of free speech.

The issue of free speech has always been difficult and controversial. One can argue that no categorical absolute position is appropriate. There may also be agreement that limits may be imposed on direct incitements to violence. But bad taste on political or religious questions or personalities, though offensive, is not such an incitement.

Pope Francis, in brief but polite remarks on January 15, 2015, and without specific reference to CH, felt differently. He suggested that freedom of expression has its limits when it comes to making fun of other people's religion. Every religion, he held, has its dignity and should be respected.

The more politically aggressive Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, the same day, declared, "Freedom of press does not mean the freedom to insult others. We do not wish to witness insults against the Prophet Mohammed in Turkey." Unlike the pope, he discredited his argument by equating the Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris with what he called "crimes against humanity" by the Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who "had no right to protest terror."

On a practical point, Davutoglu also did not "witness"

allowing into Turkey the terrorist Hayat Boumeddiene, the partner and presumed accomplice of the murderer of four Jews in Paris. Nor did he explain the unwillingness of Turkey to allow the U.S. to use its air bases in his country in the U.S. air strike campaign against the terrorist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

It is pointless to carry a sign saying "Je Suis Charlie" when referring to *The New Yorker*, a well-written but bland, safe journal that is not prone to publish a sentence so controversial that it provokes anger and violence. The sign is appropriate only in reference to the offensive and often cruel insults in a journal such as CH, which should be defended, even for some reluctantly, as the price for living in democratic societies.

What is shameful about the *New York Times* and the mass media – all those who proclaim the importance of the principle of free expression – is that they refused to publish the highly controversial cartoons that led to the massacres in Paris. To have done so would of course have offended some Muslims, but it would have been a real test of the meaningfulness of free expression. The *NY Times*, no doubt, was familiar with the position of Jay Carney, then Obama spokesperson, who said in 2012, "We have questions about the judgment of publishing" the cartoons critical of the Prophet that had been published in a Danish periodical.

British prime minister David Cameron in his press conference with President Barack Obama in the White House on January 16, 2015 spoke truth to power: "We are facing very serious Islamist terrorists threat in Europe, in America, across the world." He instructed his listeners that there is "a poisonous fanatical death cult ...perverting the religion of Islam." It is unfortunate that a similar view of the danger of Islamic fundamentalism was expressed not by the Obama administration, but by Marine Le Pen, who believes that her own party, the right-wing National Front, is the only one willing to solve

the problem.

The mainstream media with its stance of political correctness argues that the greatest danger now is that “more Europeans will come to the conclusion that all Muslim immigrants are carriers of a great and mortal threat.” It is unlikely that anyone has ever formulated such a conclusion, but realistic commentators have pointed out that a real threat exists. Indeed, in her combative book *The Rage and the Pride*, published soon after 9/11/2001 in New York, Oriana Fallaci warned that Muslim extremists with their swelling hatred for the West would launch another attack.

One can agree that the two murderous Kouachi brothers and Amedy Couibaly, who killed 17 people, are not the true representatives of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. But it is equally true that the CH satirical pieces and cartoons, some of which are infantile and obscene, are not the real instigators of the threat to the West. The threat is Islamic extremism or Islamism, not any result of Western foreign policy in the Middle East.

Nor did violence in France result from the policies of President François Hollande, or from the high rate of unemployment or poverty or because children of Muslim immigrants are said to be caught between two cultures. Nor is the German group Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against Islamization of the West), which demonstrates against immigration, the cause of violence. Rather, its members argue, its existence and activity are an attempt to prevent violence. German security authorities suggest that about 250 of the 4 million Muslims in the country are jihadists, and more than 2,000 are potentially dangerous.

Irrespective of the political views of those making the argument, criticism of Islamists and of certain parts of Muslim behavior – inferior status of women, absence of free expression on political and religious issues, the

interconnection between religious and political power – is not correctly described as “Islamophobia.”

French former prime minister Dominique de Villepin in *Le Monde* said the U.S. had lost its “moral compass” as a result of the U.S. PATRIOT Act and its legitimization of torture or illegal detention. It is true that the PATRIOT Act, passed in 2001 as a result of the Islamic attacks, allows more authority to collect intelligence, wiretapping, and surveillance of records of those suspected of potential terrorist acts, which critics say is limiting freedom.

France and other countries are currently considering similar laws to deal with Islamic terrorism. In view of the Islamic terrorism around the world against the West during the last few days; the protests outside the French consulate in Karachi; the violence in Niger and Algeria; the alleged links between the thirteen arrested in Verviers, Belgium on suspicion of planning attacks on the police; and the arrests in Berlin of individuals suspected of providing support for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the better part of wisdom is that forewarned is forearmed.

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