

Freedom Of Expression or Freedom To Blaspheme?

By Yawar Baig
18 September, 2012

Freedom of expression must not be confused with freedom from the consequences of expression. Exercising freedom and abusing it are not the same. The latter forfeits the former. Just because we are free to express ourselves, it doesn't free us from the responsibility for what we express. We are responsible for what we say and do and for the consequences thereof and so must consider carefully what we want to express. This is the basis of what we call civilized socially responsible behavior.

Once again we have an attack on the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) on whom it seems to be open season all the year round for people to take pot shots. And then cry foul when those who love him get upset. *The rule seems to be, 'I will say or do whatever I want but you must not get offended.'* Another rule, *'Prove your maturity and culture by not being offended by insults.'*

Seems strange indeed to us who are brought up in a culture where honor is not just important, it is everything. Respect for our signs and symbols is what our sense of honor is based on. And there is no symbol of our honor other than Allah Himself, that is more important than the Prophet (Peace be on him). So if someone insults him, it is very natural for a Muslim to feel sad and very mad. The claim of those who make these attacks is, 'But we are not offended when someone blasphemes against Jesus or Moses. So how can you be offended when we insult Mohammed (Peace be on them all)?' That is like saying, 'I am not offended if you curse my parents and so you should also not be offended if I curse your parents.'

Our response is of course, 'We have never cursed your parents in the first place. And secondly if you are not offended if someone curses your parents it is a sign that you are lacking in a sense of honor. That you are shameless. How can you demand that we also become shameless?' ***For the record, find me a film made by a Muslim which abuses Jesus or Moses? You won't find it because we revere them as prophets of Allah.*** So when Muslims have not done anything to abuse Christianity or Judaism, why should they be subjected to abuse from Christians and Jews (the people who allegedly made this ridiculous film) and be compelled to accept it?

I am not for a moment justifying or countenancing the violent protests and the unfortunate killing of innocent people. I have already spoken against that on several occasions since it happened. However I am writing this to request all responsible people to seriously wake up and start asking some pointed questions. One of which should be, 'What was the need for this film in the first place? What is wrong with letting people believe whatever they want? What is wrong with leaving people alone with their religions – which is a basic human right?'

I was interested to read one of the comments of the learned viewers of the film who said, 'In all their history, Muslims have contributed to the development of mankind less than a bunch of donkeys.' What do you do with such ignorance? Another one demands that he will screen this film along with clips from other films which are insulting to Hindus, Christians and Jews and he demands that people must sit and watch all of them with equanimity. Isn't that the strangest statement? For someone to make this insane demand is not considered insane. But when someone protests at this unprovoked attack on his honor, he is guilty of intolerance.

Why must people be forced to tolerate insults? Why must people be forced to sacrifice their honor just because those who have no honor want to exercise their fancy? Is this fair? Is anyone interested in justice anymore?

If we go by this logic then the right to safety and security must be balanced by the right to terrorize a population. The right to education must be balanced by the right to remain ignorant. The right to health must be balanced by the right to sickness. The right to marriage must be balanced by the right to rape and so on. Crazy, isn't it? Just as crazy as the call that the right to freedom of religion must be balanced by the right to blaspheme any religion. These people want to impose the rule on us that if the followers of any religion want to practice their religion then they must be prepared to accept the fact that all that they hold holy and sacred will be blasphemed, insulted, degraded and desecrated by other people who don't care about their feelings and they must accept this treatment without complaint.

Doesn't that sound like a gross violation of human rights? It does, to me. Violence to human rights is not only physical violence. It is also violence that is psychological and mental. Ask any divorce lawyer who is suing on the basis of mental torture. This is an accepted principal in law. Freedom is defined as something that you are permitted to do as long as it does not violate someone else's freedom; does not hurt someone else; does not harm anyone else. That is why the famous saying, "Your freedom ends where my nose begins." If we define freedom as the unbridled right of someone to do whatever he or she wants irrespective of what harm this action or speech may do to someone else's dignity, reputation, relationships or position, then we would have complete chaos and anarchy.

Defined in the way the makers of this ridiculous film and their supporters are demanding, freedom of speech must be rechristened 'freedom to abuse', 'freedom to hurt', 'freedom to damage', freedom to destroy'. This is a completely senseless argument and this behavior is not civilized at all. It is barbarism and oppression at its worst. So what is so different when it is done by film makers with the target being not one man or woman but an entire population? If anything it must make the crime humungous in magnitude. Like murder, which when it is perpetrated against an entire population becomes a holocaust and genocide. Ask the Jews who were the victims of this at the hands of Hitler. Of course that was before the West invented the term 'collateral damage'. Otherwise they too, like the Iraqis and Palestinians, would have been mere statistics rather than innocent people who suffered one of the worst man-made disasters in the history of mankind. Unfortunately it seems to be by no means the last.

Yet we are asked to accept this ridiculous argument that if we are practicing Christians then we must accept films that show Jesus as a fornicating rock star or his pictures holding a beer can in one hand and a cigarette in another. If we are practicing Hindus then we must accept the pictures of the gods we worship, on toilet seats. And if we are practicing Muslims then we must accept the most obviously hatred filled images of the one person who we hold the most holy, Mohammad, the Messenger of Allah (Peace be on him). And all of us, Muslims, Christians, Hindus and others who have not been targeted yet are told that we have to accept someone's 'right' to indulge his perversion at our expense. And if we dare to protest, then we will be labeled uncivilized, terrorists and anti-human.

In this version of civilization, it is civilized behavior to insult a religion. It is uncivilized behavior to protest against that insult. Does this make sense to you? It doesn't to me. But it seems to make sense to a small minority (my assumption) of people who are seeking to impose their warped sense of values on the rest of the world. The question is what should be our reaction? Ideally I would love to ignore this thing entirely. But I'm afraid that it may only make such people bolder and eventually we will get to a point where we can't ignore it anymore and then the reactions are more destructive.

In my view it is important for people of all religions to come together and stand together to ensure that freedom of worship and freedom of expression is ensured for everyone. And that this is done with an understanding of responsibility for expression. There can be no freedom of worship or expression when some people insult and abuse what someone else worships or reveres. Insulting someone personally is not accepted as a freedom in any civilized society. If someone did that they would become liable for legal action and punishment. So how can it be

accepted to insult someone or something that an individual worships or considers holy?
Will someone explain this insanity to me please?