

Freedom of Speech and Responsible Speech; Islamic Perspectives

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In the Name of God, Most Compassionate, Ever Merciful

In light of events in the past few years, particularly, the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad saw. Such incidents have re-ignited the age old debate about the use of freedom of speech, especially with regards to Islam.

What is the Islamic perspective of free speech. Recent events have also started discussions about a clash of civilizations. The question is does Islam want a clash of civilizations. Are the teachings of Islam leading to a clash of civilizations ? These are important questions that need to be addressed.

We are living in a world with different civilizations (communities). There is diversity in the World. Not all humans are similar. Therefore not all communities are similar. The norms and values of each community is also not the same. It is a diverse world that we live in and this is acknowledged in the verse of the Holy Quran:

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. (Quran 49: 13)

In another verse the Holy Quran confirms that not all humans should be expected to have same faith (way of life), as there is no compulsion in religion.

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion (way of life) (Quran 2:256)

So the Quran acknowledges and confirms the diversity of mankind now speaking to the Muslims it teaches them an important lesson. It teaches them how to interact and engage with those who are not Muslim. How to interact with the other communities.

Your way is yours, and my way is mine. (Quran Surah 109:6)

Ladies and Gentleman, the Quran does not promote clash of civilisations. The Quran does not promote isolation or assimilation. The Quran teaches that civilisations and cultures must be bridged. Islam advocates for a society in which there is respect for all communities and where everyone is free to practice their faith and way of life.

Islam teaches not to impose ones way of life upon another person. Muslims should not impose their values and norms on non Muslims. Similarly western society should also not try to impose their values and norms on the Muslims.

There are 7 Billion people living in the world today and the populations of Muslims in the world are 1.8 Billion. So Muslims consist of 25% of the worlds population.

Free Speech in Islam

The difference between Islam's view on free speech and the view promoted by free speech advocates these days is the intention and ultimate goal each seeks to promote. Whereas many secularists champion individual privileges, Islam promotes the principle of uniting mankind and cultivating love and understanding among people. Both endorse freedom for people to express themselves, but Islam promotes unity, whereas modern-day free speech advocates promote individualism.

The ultimate goal of Islam is to unite mankind under a single banner of peace. The Quran, Islam's holy Scripture, says God created everyone in unity, but our own man-made differences has compromised our unity.

In order to unite mankind, Islam instructs us to only use speech to be truthful, do good to others, and be fair and respectful. It attempts to pre-empt frictions by prescribing rules of conduct which guarantee for all people not only freedom of speech but also fairness, absolute justice and the right of disagreement.

The Quran on Speech:

The Quran instructs people to speak the **truth** , to speak in a manner that is **best**

O you who have believed, fear Allah and speak words of appropriate justice.

The Quran instructs people to to speak to others kindly

And talk to people in a polite and pleasant manner. (2:84)

The Quran also commands us to refrain from inappropriate speech:

Allah does not like anyone's foul words being voiced loud (publicly and openly) except by one who has been a victim of oppression (he is allowed to expose the cruelty of the oppressor) (4:149).

With Islam's guidance to purify our intentions, it promotes free speech when our intention is to serve a good purpose, promote peace, bring people closer to God and unite mankind. If, however, our intentions are to insult others or promote disorder or division, we should refrain.

Religious differences will always be there until the last day of this world. However, no individual, group, organisation or state, at any level, must be allowed to insult others. Muslims, Christians and Jews believe in the same God, whereas there are those who do not believe in any god as well as those who take multiple gods. However, respecting one another's religions and deities and not expressing insolence towards them is one of the fundamentals of Islam. The Holy Qur'an instructs us:

Do not abuse those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest exceeding the limits they should unknowingly abuse Allah. (6:108)

The most vocal proponents of freedom of speech, however, call us toward a different path, where people can say anything and everything on their mind. With no restraint on speech at all, every form of provocation would exist, thereby cultivating confrontation and antagonism. They insist this freedom entitles them the legal privilege to insult others. This is neither democracy nor freedom of speech. It fosters animosity, resentment and disorder.

Rather than focusing on privileges, Islam focuses on the principle to avoid speech that causes separation and conflict. Our words should have a positive impact on people's lives, promote truth and promote justice.

Treating speech as supreme at the expense of world peace and harmony is an incredibly flawed concept. No matter how important the cause of free speech, it still pales in comparison to the cause of world peace and unity.

Opponents of Islam claim it denies freedom of speech and censors those who insult Islam. This is factually incorrect. Islam does not prescribe any worldly punishment for unseemly speech. So people who insult should not be persecuted. Islam grants everyone the right to express disagreements with others. After all, the Prophet Muhammad called differences of opinion a blessing in society and never sought to censor or threaten those who verbally attacked him.

According to the Quran, disbelievers called him "a mad man," "a victim of deception," a "fabricator" and treated him as a liar. Some claimed he was taught by another person instead of receiving revelations from God. They called the Quran "confused dreams" and "mere stories of the past" and even tore it into pieces.

Through this all, he courageously endured all verbal assaults. Rather than calling for any punishment, the Quran instructs us to "overlook their annoying talk" and "bear patiently what they say." The lesson here for all Muslims is that we are not to be afraid of insults. Rather, we must have the same courage as our Prophet to face such insults in the eye and respond with forbearance and calm, righteous speech. Muslims must learn how their faith instructs them to respond when they are verbally attacked. No riots; no violence. We respond to speech with speech, but our speech is to be better and more dignified.

So while enemies of peace create slanderous videos, cartoons or advertisements -- like the "Innocence of Muslims" film and Charlie Hebdo's cartoon about Prophet Muhammad -- let us not fall for their claim that an individual's privilege to say whatever he or she wants is more important than the higher principle of uniting people and saving this planet from a path of animosity, hatred and destruction.

Restricted Speech

Freedom of speech is not absolute. The mere fact that there are slander and libel laws is a testament to this.

In the West there is legislation that restrict free speech. One legislation is that it is illegal to deny the holocaust in certain western countries. I personally believe also that it should be crime to deny the holocaust. I have attended holocaust memorial services in my life as a Muslim leader.

In Germany and Russia the printing and selling of Mein Kampf is for example banned. I remember working in Ebay more than 10 years ago and auctions that had anything anti semitic were removed directly.

There seem to be double standards on free speech in the West. To insult the Prophet of 1.8 Billion Muslims is allowed under the banner of freedom of speech whereas it is a crime to insult the Jewish community.

Did you know that the Prophet Muhammad was a descendent of Shem, and thus insulting him is also an anti-Semitic act. Can it be dealt with under anti-Semitism?

The newspaper Charlie Hebdo fired its cartoonist Maurice Sinet in 2008 for writing about the son of former French President Sarkozy that he converted to Judaism so he could go very far. This led to complaints of anti semitism and he was fired from his job.

Blasphemy

Islam strongly forbids any form of blasphemy, be it against any religion. I mentioned a verse from the Holy Qur'an, which I cite again:

Do not abuse those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest exceeding the limits they should unknowingly abuse Allah. (6:108)

The natural response, generally, to any blasphemy would be blasphemy in revenge. Unfortunately, that only aggravates the first party further – and so the circle begins, often never-ending and leading to disastrous consequences to humanity as a whole.

Muslims are taught not to joke, mock or satire another's religious beliefs or culture – such acts are alien to Islam. Muslims very firmly believe that one person's joke could be another person's bullying, and one person's satire could be another person's blasphemy.

Societies cannot survive without justice. It is justice that we so dearly crave for in these times of turbulence and impending darkness of ignorance of one another's beliefs and cultures. We must unite for the sake of fairness and justice if we are to strengthen our communities, and deal with blasphemy against one as blasphemy against all of us. Freedom of speech must have one standard for all. Only in that manner can we restrict and hinder the recruitment of anti-social fanatics.

I end with the words of the Qur'an that the Prophet Muhammad used when intending to unite with leaders of other countries and religions:

Come to a Common Word between us and you. (3:64)