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Freedom of virulent speech!



PHOTO: AFP

It was a sad incident that people in Danish press defamed another religion. They've done the task of sheer denigration by making cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) in their daily and they are trying to defend their atrocious act in the name of freedom of speech. It is quite appalling that people in the west show audacity towards other humans or hurt their faith on some vague and vulgar pretext. It appears sadder when they come up to defend them instead of apologising. It's indeed a sorry state that undoubtedly creates some cracks in the very essence of humanity.

It is time for the foreign ministry or the authorities concerned in Denmark that they did something to mend the damage that has been done the sooner the better.

Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong

Years ago, American society slowly and voluntarily gave up the use of the word "nigger" to describe African-Americans. The word is racist, insulting, and illegal. It hurts people's feelings, and that was reason enough for a nation to stop using the word. That's also reason enough not to publish hurtful cartoons.

Integration is a process that begins in conflict that leads to awareness and ultimately adjustments. Freedom of the press is what most westerners consider the primary bulwark against tyranny, and they consider free speech as perhaps their most fundamental right. Thus many have been willing to accept ridicule of their own beliefs as a necessary cost of free speech, including "art" depicting the Virgin Mary smeared with cow dung, and television comedy shows that satirize Jesus as a cartoon figure on a weekly basis. But this does not mean that others would make this same choice. In fact while any depiction of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) is considered blasphemous according to Islam, so is any depiction of Moses, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary.

Some see Muslim outrage at the cartoons fundamentally as an attempt at censorship. But important as the right of free speech is, it should not be used to insult or provoke other people. And there are millions of deeply insulted people who remind that the essence of civilisation is civility, and that gratuitous insults are mean spirited and hurtful. Muslims in general are an extremely devout people with a deep and intense respect for the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), a fact they expect that westerners would know and take it into consideration, and many do.

Western groups boycott products for a variety of reasons but often to assert their values, and it is an effective and peaceful way to influence business practice. When millions of Muslims boycott a country for insulting the Prophet, it should be seen for what it is an expression of hurt and an assertion of values. The cartoons are perceived as, and may have been, a taunting and deliberate provocation on behalf of the newspaper. One woman said, "It showed that they care little for our feelings." But because several European newspapers are asserting their right to be rude, it does not mean that they represent all western people in this regard.

The positive statement somehow being missed is the rejection of the depiction of Islam as a violent religion. The picture implies that Islam promotes terrorism. Those Western "experts" who try to make their case as to "the danger of Islam" should take care to listen to people like Isma, a female protester in Yemen, "We don't want to fight them. We are here in peace to express our love for our messenger." This message should be received with friendship not belligerence.

It is difficult to overestimate how personally and sincerely many Muslims feel insulted. But listening to the people of the Middle East is extremely difficult when their voices are drowned out by extremists and censored by their own governments. The

message of the protests, anger has been nearly obscured by the vitriolic rhetoric of extremists who are exploiting the incident for their own political purposes. Some Islamic countries have laws prohibiting criticism of the nation's ruler and also the rulers of "brotherly" (Muslim) nations, making it difficult to understand the poverty, corruption, repression, torture, and censorship that exist in some countries.

Communication with the west is actively discouraged through many means including Internet censorship and laws against publishing abroad.

But one thing that can be understood from the protests is that most Muslims accept the concept of the legitimacy of civilian immunity from terrorists. Many also feel civilians should be immune from foreign governments occupying or bombing them and their own governments attacking them with impunity. One premise we all may agree upon is there are many kinds of terror that civilians face, and they all are equally illegitimate. Another may be that good manners are important.

Jane Novak
American journalist and political analyst

The publication of the cartoons insulting the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) is a deliberate insult to the feelings of every single Muslim around the world and is the greatest incitement to violence at a time when there is a crying need for respect and tolerance in the global political scenario. Muslims are perfectly capable of engaging in fair and open intellectual debate about religious issues—if, for example, someone raises questions about inheritance laws or the Islamic position on interest most Muslims would be happy to engage in explanation and dialogue. Insulting the Prophet personally, however, is an emotional issue that will only create hatred because the Muslims hold the Prophet to be dearer to themselves than their own lives, their families and their property.

I once engaged in an argument with someone who professed to be a believer in complete freedom of speech. Instead of

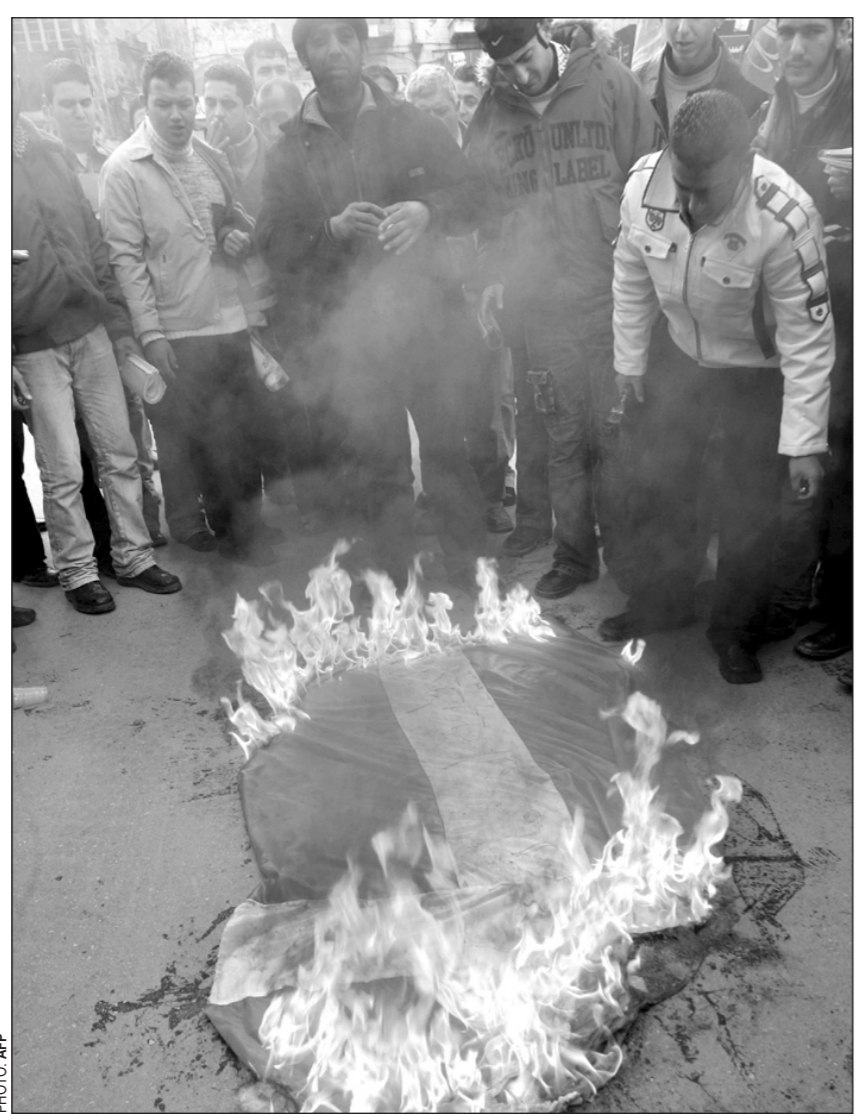


PHOTO: AFP

arguing with him, I called his mother an extremely abusive name. His face turned red with anger and he stood up and said "I'll kill you if you don't take that back!" This is precisely how Muslims react when they hear anything insulting about the Prophet; it evokes raw anger and not intellectual response. I would also like to add that the insult was intentional; after the Salman Rushdie affair the world cannot be ignorant about how Muslims feel about this matter. If people insult us it is freedom of speech and if we respond it is fanaticism.

I am happy that there have been strong protests regarding this matter all over the world and that the government of Bangladesh has also strongly censured this malicious act against the sentiments of the Muslims. However, protests that are not backed up by action will be of little use. We should collectively boycott all Danish and French goods and suspend all trading relations with them until Denmark and France and all other countries involved issue an unconditional apology to the Muslim people.

Batool Sarwar
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Freedom is a birthright of every human being. But freedom should not go beyond the threshold where it encroaches upon others' freedom. The newspapers of Denmark and other European countries committed an act of unforgivable blasphemy when they printed cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).

Ironically, these countries that boast of freedom of speech are the same countries that make it illegal and punishable by prison term for anyone who questions the holocaust or brandish Nazi symbols in public. A university professor was sacked in France because he made a research questioning the magnitude of the holocaust. In Germany one risks going to jail if one denies the holocaust or brandishes Nazi symbols in public.

In fact the Italian interior minister con-

med on Thursday that legal action is being taken against 11 football fans for brandishing Nazi symbols during a game. The 11 face prison sentences of between three months and one year.

When it comes to Islam, Denmark is way ahead of others to show her resentment. In April last year the Queen of Denmark was quoted by the Telegraph newspaper as saying "We are being challenged by Islam these years - globally as well as locally. It is a challenge we have to take seriously. We have let this issue float about for too long because we are tolerant and lazy. We have to show our opposition to Islam and we have to, at times, run the risk of having unflattering labels placed on us because there are some things for which we should display no tolerance."

Freedom of press? It's only a cruel rhetoric. The nations that justify hurting the feelings of others by upholding the glory of freedom must pay due price.

Shabbir Ahsan
Uttara, Dhaka

The Muslim community all over the world has raised outrageous protests against the cartoon on the great Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (SM). Many Europeans, including Flemming Rose, editor of the Danish newspaper have backed those publications and reproductions saying that this is permissible on the ground of freedom of speech and by this act they have advanced the cause of free-speech further. The Muslims do not accept this act due to their cultural difference, they said. A Dutch newspaper editorial, according to CNN, commented that the cause of free-speech must be upheld.

The Muslims around the world are deeply shocked at this and stormed out in protest against it. They termed this as a deliberate act of racism and blasphemy and demanded unconditional apology from those who are responsible. Emotionally hurt in their holy belief, an increasing number of Muslims are coming out in the streets, storming European missions and burning their flags. According to them, publication and reproduction of insulting depiction of the Prophet is nothing but a planned attack on their religious belief, which clearly prohibits any kind of depiction of the Prophet. The Muslims have asked for boycotting Danish products until a clear apology is made for such a provocative and offensive act against their religious belief.

Now let us try to see if this is merely a matter of free-speech, as some are trying to say, or a deliberate intention to provoke the Muslims who are, in actuality, victimised by western terrorism every day in many parts of the world. In the backdrop of the world situation, where the Muslims are being oppressed and killed every day even in their own lands which are invaded and occupied by the non-Muslims, these derogatory cartoons have come out and the publishers are ridiculously using the free-speech pretext to justify them. It is indeed hard to believe how a minimum sense of decency or sensitivity can allow a person to make such mockery of another religion. More importantly, what type of civilisation it is that advocates doing such an act on the pretext of free-speech? Is there any single instance anywhere in which the Muslims have published caricatures of Jesus or the Jewish prophet? Then why such an intentional assault on the Muslims? The rational basis of freedom of media or press is to depict the truth, and not to add salt to any injury.

We, with all our good intentions, hope that good sense still prevail and every civilised person from every corner of the world will condemn this heinous act. All religious scholars and educated Muslims of the country, not the small fundamentalist or extremist groups, should voice strong protest against this attack on Islam.

Takad Ahmed Chowdhury
Assistant Professor of English
University of Asia Pacific (UAP)

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Shabbir Ahsan
Uttara, Dhaka

Orientalism
Edward Said, the great scholar, was adept in holding a mirror up to western attitudes toward Islam. His thought provoking argument on western imperialistic project; 'Orientalism' is yet to be complete. In 'Covering Islam' he skillfully traced the origins of western misinformation about this religion. Said stated that newspaper and television news programmes depict Muslims as potential terrorists and/or religious fundamentalists. Western media have frequently simplified and caricatured the Islamic world. The latest cartoon controversy is nothing better than part of the 'Orientalist project'. Mr. Huntington's prediction, 'the clash of civilisation' is now making sense to the western world as well as oriental world.

It seems to me that the west will play the game deliberately.

Md. Harisur Rahman, JU

Why this brutality?
Who are you? No one. The man replied with fears on his face.

He was a teacher, now he is a dead. Someone or a group have executed the teacher, the teacher who was not doing good things for the nation, who was telling the truth and was trying to teach his students about transparency of life and about the awful things happening here and there. The killers thought that the teacher was not doing good things. So kill him. And they killed him.

Is this the way to treat a man? But the fact is we are facing these treatments, and we have nothing to do except writing a few lines. We have seen the brutal attack on Dr. Humayun Azad and again now on Dr. Sheikh Taher Ahmed.

Please, my request to the people of our country, do hold the principles of mankind.

Shuvo Bakar, On e-mail

Short and long term gains
One of the key obstacles towards triggering any sort of dynamism in our lethargic public sector is the opposition from populist political and union leaders. Take our nationalised commercial banks for example, any move to privatise them, or even a management change, instantly prompts angry reactions from powerful union leaders and their allies in main stream politics. Last year when there were suggestions about privatising nationalised Janata Bank, together with the Bank's CBI, the Chittagong Mayor quickly voiced his outrage threatening that any such move shall be contested with full might. Soon afterwards I went to Bangladesh and confronted the Mayor and tried to convince him that the long history of our stagnant public sector has only one answer, that is, taking the politically incorrect but economically sound decision of abrupt restructuring. Sadly but not surprisingly, the result of our conversation was his regretting that I was not being concerned about the hundreds of people who would lose their jobs. His concern was partly based on the fact that the bank might be sold at too cheap a price by corrupt policy makers and officials and jobs would be lost. I failed to convince him that the nationalised banking sector has about 40% non-performing assets due to dodgy debts and unless an entrepreneur or a consortium of them are encouraged to takeover at a significantly reduced hence a 'just' rate, hardly anyone would come forward. He argued 'when evaluating the price of a venture that is up for sale, there is no transparency and proper valuation', and that if he could run the Chittagong City

Corporation which provides service as well as generates its own income without increasing tax for last nine years, why can't the government be more active and do the same. For him, failure of the government's administration/management cannot become a reason for job losses of many and the general inefficiencies.

As the debate became more heated, I could not continue longer as I did not want to be seen as being unsympathetic towards many people being unemployed.

Hence I could not explain him why I thought a vibrant and competitive financial sector translates into better performance in other sectors of the economy and that will create more jobs than that would be lost temporarily.

I only thanked him for doing what he does with Chittagong City Corporation, which is an extra ordinary and unique example of being the best service provider in Bangladesh and for which he was rewarded and appreciated by the electorate for three consecutive terms.

The moral of the story is, sometimes it is hard for many in our political establishment to digest the fact that the private sector is far more efficiently run than nationalised industries, and you simply can't change this 'top heavy', inefficient, unaccountable army of bureaucrats who are in charge of the public sector, into becoming more entrepreneurial and actually work! Meanwhile, many popular and even sincere politicians would base their logic for opposing privatisation on personal or public sentiment. Dare anyone sacrifice short term gains for long term aims?

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Bishwa Ijtema:



PHOTO: AFP

Can we organise it better?

Recently held "Bishwa Ijtema" at Tongi, on the outskirts of Dhaka, was billed as the second largest gathering of Muslims in the world after the Hajj. Well, it might well have been the largest! While the Hajj congregation is restricted by the Saudi government to about 2 - 2.5 million, the numbers of participants in Bishwa Ijtema were estimated to be 2.5 - 3 million. The annual congregation of the Tabligh Jamaat that started in a small way in the early 70s has now turned into a national event. For nearly a week, the entire capital takes the look of a Pilgrim City with Muslim males pouring from all over. Although in the initial years, the Ijtema was organised through private efforts, the government machinery increasingly got involved over the years. This year, there was a senior minister available on site 24-hours to monitor the organisational efforts. Thus it can be said that the Bishwa Ijtema has become a major government responsibility. So far, there has not been any major accident in the Ijtema, but the probability of disasters such as fire or stampede cannot be ruled out. With increasing numbers of Muslims from abroad arriving every year, the responsibility for the smooth conduct of the Bishwa Ijtema cannot be left alone to the Tablighi Elders; the Government, especially the Religious Affairs Ministry, should get involved in the organisational process at all levels. Below are some of my suggestions that could help us better organise the Bishwa Ijtema.

The present Ijtema ground on the northern bank of the Turag River is already inadequate and unsuitable for holding a huge congregation. When the present site was chosen in the 70s, Tongi was a sleepy town with few industrial establishments - mostly closed and abandoned. The empty space on the river bank was adequate for holding the congregation then. But now Tongi falls within the Dhaka Metropolitan. Industrial units, as well as the residential areas, are coming up all around the Ijtema ground. At the same time, the size of the congregation is increasing every year. Dhaka, an already crowded and congested capital, cannot bear the burden of an inflow of 2 - 3 million pilgrims every year. In fact, the city life comes to a virtual

standstill during the Ijtema week. This year, the Ijtema crowd overflowed on to the southern bank of the Turag too. It has been reported that the government allotted additional land on the southern bank to the Tabligh Jamaat, cancelling few original allotments. However, this cannot be a permanent solution. We need to plan for the future when Bishwa Ijtema could become a truly world event. We need a space that would have enough room for expansion and planned development.

One such area that comes to my mind is the huge uninhabited landmass that is available on either side of the Jamuna Bridge approaches. The sites are well-connected by road and rail, are well above the flood plain and could be easily developed to be the permanent site of the Bishwa Ijtema. Water supply, sanitation, electricity, telecommunication facilities could be developed and eventually hotels, restaurants and shopping malls could come up to cater to the needs of the devotees. People from all over the country as well as from abroad can easily reach the site without causing much disruption of the capital's normal life.

The government should establish a suitable mosque on Ijtema site that could serve as the main 'Markaz' of the Tabligh Jamaat. The shifting of the main 'Markaz' from its present location at the Kakrail Mosque would relieve the pressure of thousands of devotees that flock at Kakrail and then overflow into the Ramna Park causing much inconvenience to the park users. In the new site, the government should establish hygienic toilets, not the trench types at Tongi that throw human excreta into the Turag River. In course of time, we could build more and more permanent structures at the new Ijtema site to house the devotees. In fact, any investment into the infrastructure could pay the dividend in the form of greater economic activities in the area.

I hope our policy makers as well as the Tablighi Elders would favourably consider the above suggestions.

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