

The Danish cartoons and freedom of expression

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KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

UNSAVOURY characterization of Prophet Mohammed (SM) in the cartoons published by a Danish newspaper and reproduced by several European newspapers have brought to the fore the modern debate on limits of freedom of expression and speech. It is generally accepted that freedom of expression is circumscribed by its adverse fallout on the dignity of the individual (libel) or the majesty of the divinity (blasphemy). Society by definition being a conglomerate of diverse individuals societal responsibility demands that rights of the members of the society not be intruded upon.

Libel laws exist in a variety of forms to safeguard individual honour. Similarly, blasphemy laws enacted in many countries, though increasingly falling into disuse, are aimed at protecting the majesty of God. Black's Law Dictionary defines blasphemy as: "Any oral or written reproach maliciously cast upon God, His name, attributes or religion." The Catholic Encyclopedia considers blasphemy as heretical when insult to God involves a declaration that is against the faith; imprecatory when it would cry a malediction upon Divinity; and contumacious when it is wholly made up of contempt or indignation towards God. Interestingly, British Criminal law contains in its statute book law relating to blasphemy even today though it was developed mainly during the 18th century to protect the Anglican version of Christianity. As late as 1979, the House of Lords upheld a prosecution on charge of blasphemy centering on the publication of an erotic homosexual poem about Jesus Christ in a British weekly. When the decision was challenged, the European Court of Human

Rights ruled that protection for religious freedom was superior in this case to protection of freedom of expression.

The arguments proffered in this essay are not for enacting blasphemy laws. On the contrary, the First Amendment to the US Constitution insisting that "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion," a declaration powerfully pursued by the US Supreme Court to ensure separation of the Church from the State and generally emulated by developed economies, should act as beacon light to ships sailing against the tumultuous waves of the 21st century seas.

With the virtual disappearance of communism from its European strongholds, Karl Marx's description of religion as the opiate of man has lost favour with the majority of the people of the world. Dethronement of atheism has, perhaps, resulted in people's greater devotion to established religions than would have otherwise been expected. Though an inverse relationship between wealth and religiosity is believed to be axiomatic, the description of the US, the largest economy in the world, as "a poster child of super natural belief" is profoundly telling. Supernatural belief, according to anthropologist Edward Taylor, is the "minimum definition of religion." Just about any American, blessed with the material advantages of technological age, believes in God in the Biblical sense, along with miracles, angels, devils, and afterlife. This belief in the supernatural is not confined to Christian conservatives, once described by the Washington Post as "largely poor, the uneducated," but, for example, embraces about half of the scientific community of the US.

There is nothing inherently wrong in being wealthy and religious. Indeed, some psychologists

have concluded that belief in God is instinctive and natural and not necessarily learnt. The problem is not in the contradiction between religiosity and atheism/agnosticism but in the continuing war between religions. Historian Webster's description of the Thirty Years' War as "the last great war of religion" could not have been more misplaced if one were to chronicle the persecution of the Jews at the hands of the Christians for centuries and the current tension between the Islamic and the Judeo-Christian civilizations. The terrorist attacks of 9/11, though carried out by a handful of renegades in the name of Islam and condemned by the whole Islamic world (along with the rest of the international community), have nonetheless reduced the Muslims, particularly the Muslim diaspora living in the West, to negotiating the parameters of minority citizenship.

In Denmark the publication of the cartoons and the consequent Muslim outrage in Europe and in some parts of the world has increased the popularity of the populist anti-immigration Danish Peoples Party which openly says that Islam is not a religion but a terrorist organization. European antipathy towards Islam is grounded in history. The Crusades and the domination by the Ottoman Turks over a large part of European lands fuelled anti-Islamic sentiments among the Europeans which had remained dormant as Christians of different denominations fought among themselves and in their struggle to colonize then pristine world unsullied by European lust and greed, and engineered the death and destruction of millions of people in the two Great Wars in the twentieth century.

Like infected blood, anti-Muslim feelings flowing in the subterranean veins has now found

renewed expressions. For example, when finally the issue of Turkey's admission as a member of the European Union could not be delayed any longer, some European nations have voiced opposition to Turkish membership. Austria which historically served as bulwark against Ottoman expansionism in Europe has suggested for a pan-European referendum on the question of Turkish membership. Former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing expressed the fear that Turkey's membership would spell the end of Europe. Other opponents include Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta, and Cyprus. Prominent German politician Wolfgang Schäuble was skeptical that an EU with Turkey as a member would continue to be able to build "an ever closer political union or speak with one voice," and suggested limiting the size of the European Union.

Late last year France witnessed religious-race riots between Muslim youths and the French authorities. Though apparently caused by the accidental death by electrocution of two Muslim youths fleeing from the pursuit of the French police, the riots were basically caused by decades long socio-economic exclusion of Muslim immigrants brought into France from North Africa to shore up the post-war sagging French economy. Generally, immigration is determined by the demands of the advanced metropolitan capitalism weighed against the disadvantages of socio-cultural asymmetry caused by the refusal/inability of the immigrants to fully assimilate with the values of the host country. This gives rise to "us" versus "them" feeling, resulting in sharp division in society and consequent violence in which the authorities tend to take the side of the host country population against the

immigrants, forgetting that the second or third generation immigrants are no less citizens of the country as those belonging to the majority community. Additionally the "failure" of the immigrants to fully integrate themselves with the mainstream life results in gaining political territory by anti-immigration political parties who play on the unfounded fear of the host country voters about the immigrants.

In response to the OIC condemnation of the "printing of blasphemous and insulting caricatures of Prophet Mohammed (SM)" which the organization thought to be a "trap set up by fundamentalists and foster acts of revenge," Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen felt that "freedom of speech is absolute (and) not negotiable" while a prominent Danish academic expressed the view that "people are inclined to see Islam and political extremism as two sides of the same coin." His subsequent apology for the publication of the cartoons and his description of Denmark as a country tolerant of different religions and having an open society is too little too late.

One wonders whether the repeated onslaught on Muslim sensibilities through cleverly disguised provocations are not aimed at perpetuating Western minds along the views expressed by Bernard Lewis, among others, of Islam being an intolerant religion. "Islam was never prepared," writes Lewis "either in theory or in practice, to accord full equality to those who held other beliefs and practiced other forms of worship." Besides, adds Lewis, "There exists millennial rivalry between Islam and Christianity, a distinctive civilization inspired by that religion...the struggle between these rival systems has now lasted for some fourteen centuries...and has continued virtually to the present day."

The other school of thought is less severe on Islam, for example, Samuel Huntington of Clash of Civilization fame observes: "The West won the world not by supremacy of ideas or values or religion but rather by superiority

in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do."

The whole episode about the cartoons' portrayal of Prophet Mohammed (SM) in unflattering terms appears to be more by design than by accident. Had the Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen not refused to see the Arab ambassadors when they sought a meeting with him to discuss the cartoons' publication last September, the current explosion in the Islamic world could have been avoided. The situation deteriorated with the repeat publication of the cartoons in January in a small evangelical Christian newspaper in Norway and in other European countries and with the EU backing of the Danish position on inviolability of freedom of expression at the cost of hurting the religious sentiment of more than one billion Muslims all over the world. This arrogant display of an "inerrant" interpretation of right to expression leads one to look for other views. "For a society to claim universal desirability," wrote Irish anthropologist Vincent Tucker "while turning its back on others from whom it is convinced it has nothing to learn, is not only cultural elitism, but cultural racism."

It becomes difficult to comprehend the inherent contradictions in making Woodrow Wilsonian promises to democratize the world (made once again in Bush's 2006 State of the Union address) and lack of Western comprehension of Islamic fundamentalism's repeated attempt to transcend the boundary of quietism. The West, unless it opts to retreat into some fortified areas of affluence to escape the contagion of religious extremism (a doubtful venture in this age of globalism and fraught with risk to its own security), would be better advised to cooperate with the moderate elements in the Muslim world engaged in their struggle for the soul of Islam against those imbued with absolutist, "inerrant" and arrogant confidence in the supremacy of their belief.

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Murder on RU campus

Not only teachers, employees are being recruited in hundreds, and again denied confirmation. Teachers are assaulting employees. Employees are beating up teachers. A state of anarchy is writ large on some campuses. However, the state machinery keeps mum. How can it be so callous? In managing things in the universities, it can be said that the government, the real controller of things, has failed to the point of being worthless.

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

KILLING is always a terrible crime. But killing a colleague, if the indictment is true, though please bear in mind that no one should be considered guilty until this is proven in a court of law, for mere seniority and little financial gain, as alleged, is truly shocking.

Such awful fratricide for so little reason is a novel and unwelcome development in the history of our universities. It is all the more pain-

ful to learn that the slain teacher was instrumental in the accused one's career advancement. What a return and what a lesson to be learnt by the benevolent ones! The whole of the university teachers' community is dumbfounded, bowed down with utter shame.

Though the culture of manhandling university teachers is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, putting an end to their life seems to have become a fashion these days which perhaps got started with the killing of Professor Yunus of Rajshahi University. With the

unfolding of the conspiracy behind the killing of Professor Taher Ahmed of the same university, our conscience is being consistently pierced at every single moment.

I wonder how such ones can become teachers of the centers of excellence. What will the students learn from these born sinners? Do the students go to universities for being trained in the art of culpable homicide? Politics is alleged to be involved in this heinous act, along with devastating greed and wrath of the accused teacher. Though the teacher, despite being a relative of a

minister, has been arrested forthwith, the security people are not sure as to arresting the ones that have strategic political godfathers. Actually, obnoxious equations and ramifications of power politics are consistently standing in the way of meting out justice to the culprits. A good number of university teachers have been mistreated by the student leaders to date. But, the mighty student leaders got off scot-free on almost every occasion.

However, for such deplorable conditions of teachers, they themselves are not less responsible.

Involvement in dirty politics and unscrupulous partisanship has grown so ingrained that some groups of teachers are not even ready to sympathize with the assaulted one if he does not belong to their group. On the contrary, they rejoice at the assault. What an irony! They blindly and vigorously take sides with the mighty student leaders. Moreover, one will definitely feel pity to observe the desperation among some politicized teachers to save and promote the student leaders they are connected, or rather, loyal to.

These senseless teachers have clean forgotten about the fact that all their evil actions might well be retaliated, and retaliation, in most instances, takes place with a vengeance. In simple terms, such teachers are debasing themselves in no small measure and defiling

the sanctity of universities. They are living in glass houses but nurturing the mistaken belief that they will remain safe in this bloody game of politics. They are rather creating such an environment in which any teacher of any colour might get mauled and, of course, killed at any time.

Over and above, cut-throat anomalies in the recruitment and promotion of universities are now the order of the day. Budget deficit is looming large. There is no plan whatsoever as to how the incumbents and recruits will be paid. Instead, even provident funds of current teachers are being drained out in paying the redundant recruits. In a word, a wild recruitment spree is taking place in terms of both teachers and employees.

Most of the university authorities are now acting and behaving in such a manner that there is no

tomorrow and everything is at stake and, hence, they don't want to spare even an inch for the successors to fill up. In many instances, teachers are being inducted in universities, not to fill up essential vacancies, not even to serve the students better, but simply to add to the vote bank and come up with flying colours in various elections. This is not to imply that political recruitment did not take place previously, but it has never been this blatant and widespread before.

Not only teachers, employees are being recruited in hundreds, and again denied confirmation. Teachers are assaulting employees. Employees are beating up teachers. A state of anarchy is writ large on some campuses.

However, the state machinery keeps mum. How can it be so callous? In managing things in the

universities, it can be said that the government, the real controller of things, has failed to the point of being worthless.

Anyway, the bottom line is that the recent killing can well be an ideal eye-opener for the university teachers. It calls for across-the-board overhauling of the total recruitment and promotion system in the universities, because if a few more of the nature of the accused teacher have already got in or are on the way to getting in, our fate is sealed.

A thorough soul-searching is the very urgent need of the hour. The future is bleak unless a true check is implanted and the university teachers themselves will have to take the decisive move in this regard.

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From Kansat to Paltan

Dhaka is now sending out a very disturbing signal to the periphery by blocking peaceful avenues of public protests. If mainstream political parties are not allowed the minimum platform for registering their (however alienated they may be) grievances, if public right to peaceful protest is ruthlessly suppressed, if all of us are handed over duct-tape to seal our lips, we should think about what undemocratic and unconstitutional forces would ultimately come to benefit from this unhealthy state of affairs.

TASNEEM KHALE

THESE days, it seems, one must think twice before labelling the society we live in as a "democracy."

It is true, that we have an elected government very much in place, and by God's grace, we are yet to

suffer under any police regime in its totality, however, recent developments in different corners of the country are setting off unwelcome alarms.

To our misfortune, we are witnessing brutal suppression of public protest and intolerant handling of opposition agitation becoming the practice.

To start with, let me count the dead bodies in Kansat.

What exactly made the Kansat police open fire on a group of villagers (with no certain partisan affiliation), killing nine people and injuring scores, remains the burning question.

How "unruly" can a "mob" of farmers -- registering their genuine

grievances against an unjust and corrupt system of electricity distribution -- get, that the police (100 percent sponsored by public tax-money) have no option but to resort to bullets? May I ask, do our police protect citizens, or do the citizens need protection from the police?

When more than a thousand

irrigation pumps become useless metal-scrap, thanks to wildcat load-shedding, when lush paddy fields go barren after acre, and when those very farmers in charge of feeding a nation of 140 million (all the police officers taking part in the shooting frenzy included) start agitating for an uninterrupted supply of electricity, laying siege to Palli Bidyut sub-stations, then this kind of callous repression is unwarranted, at the very minimum, if not the utmost betrayal of the promise of "right to peaceful protest" enshrined in our constitution.

And this story does not end here. Irony builds up while the state machinery chooses to tackle the farmers (without ever even giving them a fair hearing) by unleashing

its forces of terror and our mainstream opposition political parties (even those with red kurtas) take happy naps before gearing up for their "long march" to Dhaka.

I have been searching through the newspapers for one serious reference from any of the top opposition leaders regarding the Kansat drama for the past few days. Need I mention that I have failed?

Now the question targeted for the opposition remains, whether the Kansat killing is any less important than what is going wrong with the voter list? If I may note, our politics is now so very alienated from the grass-roots, that according to a Prothom Alo report, BNP and AL leaders in Kansat have confessed that they knew about the electricity

problem from the beginning but never felt the urgency to treat the issue with any sort of attention. Maybe, ruling party activists were too busy plotting obstruction to opposition party long march while the opposition was busy planning its route to Dhaka and forming an "electoral alliance."

And then the opposition party marched (in four-wheelers) towards Dhaka, leaving behind the farmers of Chapainawabganj, without electricity and without any platform of protest.

Now, the opposition long march towards Dhaka that ended in a rally at Paltan Maidan was never expected to unseat the government. In my humble opinion, it was more of a political soap than any sort of revolution. However, our omnipresent and omnipotent sarkar apparently thought otherwise and decided to come down heavily on the public once more.

This time more than 8,000 people came under blanket arrests in Dhaka city on the eve of the opposition rally. Police and JCD activists (note the camaraderie) obstructed the long march at different entry-points of Dhaka in all possible manner, from barbed-wire fences to armed assault. From the government's side, it was a mindless (but usual by now) show of intolerance towards opposing views and agitations. Such a smart decision it was -- to impede the opposition's "planned as peaceful" program -- that nov-

as its aftermath, we are all set to suffer yet another (a political campaign more violent than a "long march") hartal on February 15.

As far as my analysis of the current trend goes, Dhaka is now sending out a very disturbing signal to the periphery by blocking peaceful avenues of public protests. If mainstream political parties are not allowed the minimum platform for registering their (however alienated they may be) grievances, if public right to peaceful protest is ruthlessly suppressed, if all of us are handed over duct-tape to seal our lips, we should think about what undemocratic and unconstitutional forces would ultimately come to benefit from this unhealthy state of affairs.

In a democracy (I hope we still are one), by definition, opposing views and public protests must be treated with the highest level of tolerance and patience. Unfortunately, as we can see from our recent experiences, that is not the case. And if that is not the case, we are now witnessing yet another "long march" undertaken by the government -- from democracy towards despotism.

And on this, I would like to recall the words of Henry David Thoreau. If the king is uncivil then the subjects will one day rise up in "civil disobedience."

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