

The Pope and I

CHINTITO

Somebody pinch me please, for this cannot be real. The Pope has the mystical power to read the Star in advance; simply mind-blowing. Or else, how do you explain his statement aboard the Papal plane Jan 15 replicating mine that was submitted two days earlier?

The Star of Jan 16 had this from Yours Truly: Imagine your father being called a b_____d as an expression of freedom of speech by a Charlie newspaper. Imagine your mother being shown in a cartoon in the state of giving birth to swine by a Hebdo magazine because it considers it its right to degrade, abuse and humiliate fellow (excuse me!) human beings; and that bizarre 'right' is protected by the law of that country. The "freedom-loving people of some parts of the world have established a class of democracy that permits insulting our beloved Prophet Mohammad (pbuh)", and that is outright condemnable.

And what did Pope Francis say during a press conference on the way to the Philippines from Sri Lanka? "One cannot provoke, one cannot insult other people's faith, one cannot make fun of faith". (CBS) He was responding to a question about the recent Paris terror. He made it clear that the gruesome massacre in Paris could not be justified under any circumstances, but suggested the magazine Charlie Hebdo "had gone too far" and were provocateurs.

Pope Francis said there are limits to freedom of speech, especially when it insults or ridicules someone's faith. By way of example, he referred to Alberto Gasbarri, who organizes papal trips and was standing by his side aboard the papal plane. "If my good friend Dr Gasbarri says a curse word against my mother, he can expect a punch," Francis said half-jokingly, throwing a mock punch his way. "It's normal. You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others." (AP)

As a real believer in free speech, not akin to a license to abuse another human being, I wonder how the editors, cartoonists and advocates of Charlie Hebdo can justify their doings. They could not get away by using free speech in their day-to-day affairs in their own country.

In a court of law, you have to "Me Lord" the judge after every breath. And in no way you may offend His Honour, or call the person under the wig by his ungiven name. Can Charlie Hebdoists or anyone else show their middle finger to a magistrate or a court official and get away with it as an expression of free speech? Please do not try this at court.

On a football pitch, even though team captains can talk (back) to the referee and make his team's protest known, even then he has to draw a line

somewhere. The captain cannot shove the ref and say, 'Get lost. You were totally off your bonkers when you did not spot that foul, and hey this is free speech'. You can be rest assured that captain could be banned for anywhere between three matches to a year or more. Please do not try this even in jest.

I wish this down-to-earth Pope Francis was French. And it is about time, as there has not been a



Pope Francis

PHOTO COURTESY: WIKIPEDIA

French Pope in the last almost 650 years, for he could have perhaps changed their mind-set about selective 'free speech'. France may not have been then the place for an offending magazine of the likes of Charlie Hebdo to found, survive and prosper.

The French animosity towards the Muslim custom can be traced back to 1999 when teachers in the small French town of Flers went on strike after a 12-year-old pupil refused to remove her headscarf. Amazingly, almost without exception, all the seventy staff at the school objected to the little girl wearing hijab. What were they scared of? Angels, perhaps.

Angelique Zainab was a member of the visiting British Willesden Judo Club competing against French teams in Paris in 2002. The French lived up to their anti-Hijab dogma and barred 10-year old Zainab from participating in the tournament because she was wearing "a hijab along with her judo uniform". Zainab was not removing the scarf

because it was part of her belief. And what did the Britons do? Bravo! The entire British squad of one hundred participants returned the 35 medals they had won till then and "walked out in solidarity with Zainab".

The French justice minister, Dominique Perben, got into the bandwagon and in 2003 he replaced "a woman juror who wore her Islamic headscarf in court, saying he wanted to ensure a fair trial". How unjust could justice be?

Another notable incident targeting the hijab occurred in 2003; the French bank Société Générale turned away a Muslim woman from its branch in Paris after she refused their demands to take off her hijab. What has a bank to do with how someone dressed, as long as she was well-covered? And, she was.



Police officers, emergency vehicles, and journalists at the scene some two hours after the Paris shooting.

aspect of their religion. But why? Was it absolutely necessary to offend a small minority?

Chirac was on television to state that Muslim women will not be permitted to request a female doctor for treatment even if one is available. Now such a request women can make in almost any country in the world, developed or not, from civilisation point of view.

President Chirac was also in favour of private businesses banning their Muslim employees from wearing hijab "for reasons of security or client contact" and sack them if they don't abide with the ban.

In 2004 the French did indeed ban all religious signs – veils, turbans and symbols – in government primary and secondary schools. Pray, why? How have those angels offended you? Or was it the testing ground for future prohibitions? No wonder there was no Pope for centuries.

Of course a ban cannot stop a believer, and the case of two Muslim girls of a Jewish father (yes, you heard me right, Jewish father) is pertinent here. Lila and Alma Levy, aged 18 and 16, were expelled as recent as early this year from their Paris school for wearing headscarves; their father described the decision as 'scholastic apartheid'.

A little over ten percent of the French population are Muslim, but not a single of them are in the 577-member French National Assembly. France has 36,000 mayors. It is not essential that some of them ought to be Muslim, but you guessed it right, not one of them is.

The Muslims have long been marginalised, and systematically so. They were pushed to living in squalor, they were brought up uneducated, victimised in an unannounced apartheid system, and they were pushed against the wall: socially, economically and religiously.

I can only echo the statement of Bill Donahue, president of the New York-based Catholic League, who released on the day of the Charlie Hebdo killings a statement headlined, "Muslims have a right to be angry". Donahue poignantly stated that Charlie Hebdo cartoonist Stephane Charbonnier, "didn't understand the role he played in his own death".

A French Pope could have warned the French magazine that "criticism of religion is problematic" and is not free speech. Pope Francis indeed did just that.

As a continuing saga, citing a 1999 ruling, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003 added further insult to the dignity of the Muslim women when he wanted to force them to remove their hijab for their identity card and passport photographs. Without any problem whatsoever, women all over the world, those who wish to, are having their ID photos taken with their headscarves.

Reuters reported Jan 5 2004 that "a French doctor has put up a sign, reminiscent of the 'No Blacks' and 'No Jews' signs of previous shameful times, which reads 'I refuse to treat veiled women' in the waiting room of his Paris-based medical clinic".

About the same time, and most deplorably, the then conservative president Jacques Chirac wanted the French Parliament to ban the Muslim woman's head gear, a way of dressing ordained in the Qur'an. The French authorities were trying to criminalise the practitioners of Islam by attacking a fundamental