

Exercising free speech doesn't mean spreading hatred is acceptable

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

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The controversy started by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten when it published insulting cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad has ignited debates throughout the world about freedom of speech and the place of respect for religious sensitivities.

People are taking sides and hardening their positions. Newspapers across Europe have reprinted the cartoons, citing rights to free speech while Muslim nations and people are expressing offense at the vilifying depictions of Muhammad and their faith by protesting, recalling ambassadors and boycotting Danish products.

Just because one has the legal right to say something doesn't mean it should be said or it is the right thing to say. In a free society, we can publish speech that humiliates, slanders, and incites hate. But should we? Freedom of speech should not be used as a license to spread hatred.

In December 2005, when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called the Holocaust a myth, his comments were censured and condemned around the world, and rightly so. His comments were hurtful and denigrated the memory of the many innocent people who died in that dark chapter of history. The fact that Ahmadinejad could and did say something outrageous in denying the Holocaust was not hailed as a victory for free speech; nor were his words continuously reprinted to celebrate freedom of expression. Instead, his comments were referred to only as people expressed their outrage and condemnations.

The British newspaper The Guardian recently reported that the Danish newspaper that initially ran the cartoons defaming Muhammad had refused to run drawings lampooning Jesus Christ three years ago on the "grounds that they could be offensive to readers and were not funny." With this revelation, the newspaper's intent became clear. In today's polarized world, newspapers hiding behind freedom of speech in an effort to provoke and demean a disenfranchised European Muslim minority is nothing to celebrate.

As a Muslim and an American, I cherish the right to speak freely, but I also believe this right should be exercised with responsibility and respect. U.S. State Department spokesperson Kurtis Cooper stated: "We all fully recognize and respect freedom of the press and expression, but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious or ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable." The Vatican's position is that "the right to freedom of thought and expression . . . cannot entail the right to offend the religious sentiment of believers."

Muslims clearly have the right to protest the defamatory and insulting attack on their faith and beloved prophet. But even though some European newspapers may be misusing freedom of speech in order to humiliate and sow hatred, it certainly does not give Muslims the excuse to behave in a violent, outrageous manner. The few Muslims who have chosen to react in violent ways are betraying the example and teachings of the prophet they are trying to defend.

What sense does it make to protest the newspapers' depiction of your prophet and your religion as a terrorist entity by kidnapping, making death threats, starting fires and terrorizing people? Instead of transforming the stereotypes into reality, Muslims across the world must follow Muhammad's example and eschew violence and find peaceful means to protest.

Although he was targeted, insulted and attacked often during his life, Muhammad responded with mercy and forgiveness. "Do not do evil to those who do evil to you, but deal with them with forgiveness and kindness," he said. He was patient with a woman who used to insult and throw garbage on him whenever he passed by her house. When one day no garbage was thrown, Muhammad went to find out what had happened to her. When he learned she was sick, he visited her, and his kindness won her over. It is because of examples like these that Muslims develop such a love for this man and for the message he stood for.

A Muslim following Muhammad's example would respond with compassion, education and perseverance in the pursuit of understanding. Many Muslims are doing just that, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which is launching an educational campaign about the life of Muhammad.

I hope we will reach a time when people will refuse to publish cartoons and material because of its hurtfulness to others. Good people must refuse to tolerate the intentional demeaning or targeting of others, not because it is legally banned, but because common standards of maintaining dignity and respect for all are cherished.

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