

In the name of

Allah,

the Beneficent,

the Merciful

# Al-Furqān

the bi-weekly electronic newsletter from the office of  
**Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi**

O Allah,

Bless

Muhammad

& his progeny

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION only a right or also a responsibility?

### Speech: the most precious human quality

A major mark of distinction of humans over other living things is the ability to speak. Speech is, after all, the most precious gift that God has given to our species. In Islamic logic, a human is described as “the speaking animal” and an animal as “the silent animal”. Through speech, we can communicate with one another, we can articulate our views and ideas, we can express our feelings and sentiments, we can describe our dreams and aspirations, and we can chart our future plans and expectations. Writing and drawing are dimensions of human ability to express his or her ideas and thoughts.

### Freedom of Expression

Is freedom of expression absolute and unlimited? Can a person write, say, draw or paint whatever he or she likes? Or are there some limitations on that freedom?

While speech is the most precious gift given to us, it also has the potential of hurting others. The key to success in character building is achieving that proper medium in various virtues. When it comes to the virtue of speech, you have to train yourself “to think before you speak” and not “to speak before you think”. A *hadith* says that a wise person’s tongue is behind his or her mind while a fool’s mind is behind his or her tongue! This becomes even more important when you write or speak as a public figure.

No right exists in vacuum; it is always coupled with an equal level of responsibility. In words of Imam ‘Ali (a.s.), “A right is very vast in description...It does not accrue to any person unless it accrues against him also, and right does not accrue against a person unless it also accrues in his favour.”<sup>1</sup> In many civilized societies, saying or writing something that incites violence against an identifiable group, especially a minority, is illegal. Similarly, to defame a person’s reputation is also illegal. Britain, for example, restricts the right of free speech on grounds of national security and prevention of disorder.

Restrictions and limits are put on statements that hurt the sensibilities of certain groups in the West. Britain also has a blasphemy law which bans defamation of the Christian God but not of other faiths. Nonetheless, many European countries as well as Canada forbid questioning or denying the holocaust. The very recent case of the British historian, David Irving, and his trial for holocaust denial in Austria is a living example of how sensibilities of certain groups are respected in Europe.

### Free Speech & the Danish Cartoons

In this backdrop, it is indeed very sad to see that the Europeans have no respect or any regard for Muslim sensibilities. Muslims’ religion, culture, and their Prophet may be defamed in any way they like—all in the name of freedom of expression or free speech. They seem to ignore the present reality that France and Germany have millions of Muslims, and that Bosnia, a Muslim country, is as European as Spain or Croatia.

Lack of respect for Muslim sensibilities was first visibly felt by the French ban on *hijāb* in public institutions and now we see *Jyllands-Posten’s* cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny).

**Let it be stated clearly that Muslims do not question the right of any writer or speaker, who adapts academic methods, to criticise Islam and Muslims. Articles, books, and speeches critical of Islam and Muslims are published at all the times. Caricaturing Muslims, even clerics and political leaders, is also common. But you never hear the Muslims protesting against them.**

However, the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons were not of academic nature and the fact that they were insulting is also beyond any doubt, especially those portraying the Prophet of Islam as a terrorist. **They strengthen the subliminal stereotype in Europeans’ minds that Islam is a religion of violence and that Muslims are terrorists.**

Vol. 1 \* 17 Muharram 1427 \* 16 February 2006 \* No. 3

Tel: (905) 707-0982 muhammad57@rogers.com Fax: (905) 737-9781

## Reaction of the Western Powers

In the post-9/11 environment, it was surprising to see a relatively balanced reaction shown by the western political leaders. Jack Straw, the British Foreign Secretary described the cartoons as “insensitive” and “unnecessary”. President Jacques Chirac of France, while supporting the freedom of expression as “one of the foundations of the republic,” added a plea for “respect and moderation” in its application.<sup>2</sup> And when *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical French weekly, republished the cartoons, Chirac condemned “all manifest provocation that might dangerously fan passion.”<sup>3</sup>

President Bush also said that “freedom comes the responsibility to be thoughtful about others.” Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada said, “I regret the publication of this material in several media outlets. While we understand this issue is divisive, our government wishes that people be respectful of beliefs of others.”<sup>4</sup>

## Reaction of the Muslim World

Muslims have been truly hurt by the portrayal of their Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) as a man who promotes violence. The Prophet is the example par excellent of a perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*), every aspect of his life is the good role-model (*uswah hasanah*) for Muslims.

**Prophet Muhammad is the spiritual father of the Muslim community and, naturally, no faithful child will tolerate the defamation of his or her father.** So the reaction of the Muslims in form of peaceful protest marches is very natural. And there is no law which disallows this kind of protestation.

More so when we find out that this was not just a mistake; the cartoons were commissioned by Flemming Rose, the cultural editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, deliberately to challenge the sensibilities of Muslims.<sup>5</sup> To judge the Muslims’ reaction by current Christian attitude of not reacting against caricaturizing Jesus is nothing short of cultural imperialism.

**Of course, use of violence, burning buildings and vehicles as seen in some of the protest rallies is not acceptable and has been rightly condemned by all senior religious and political leaders from the Grand Ayatullah Sistani to the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Ali Gomma, as well as from Ihsanoglu, the head of Organisation of Islamic Conference to Manoucher Mottaki, the Foreign Minister of Iran.**

## Did Muslims Over-React?

The point to ponder in this entire sad episode is that no sense of remorse or apology was forthcoming from *Jylland-Posten* and the Danish government nor any con-

demnation was issued by the western political leaders *except* after mass protests started in the Muslim countries. The balancing act of defending the “absolute freedom of expression” and of the “responsible freedom of expression” only came about after Muslims started protesting. Danish Muslims’ protest in Denmark had no impact, whatsoever, on the newspaper or the government.

Therefore, to say that the protest rallies were organized by Muslim governments and fundamental political parties for their own political gains—a statement uttered by US Secretary of State as well as by some self-loathing Muslim intellectuals and writers in the West—is to insult the sincere love and intense devotion that Muslims have towards their Prophet.

It is important to understand that the Muslims are not a bunch of lunatics who started expressing their anger right away. Initially, the Muslims in Denmark confronted this problem locally in a peaceful manner. Only when the newspaper as well as the government ignored their complain, did they go outside Denmark to seek support from fellow Muslims.

The sequence of events really puts the stages of escalation in true perspective:

- Sept 30:** cartoons are published in *Jyllands-Posten*.  
**Oct 14:** Muslim leaders in Copenhagen organized a peaceful demonstration of three to five thousand people demanding that the paper issue an apology for the drawings. The paper rebuffed the demand. Ahmed Akkari, the spokesman for the European Committee for Honouring the Prophet, an umbrella group of 27 Danish Muslim organizations, said, “We collected 17,000 signatures and delivered them to the office of the prime minister, we saw the minister of culture, we talked to the editor of the *Jyllands-Posten*, we took many steps within Denmark, but could get no action.”  
**Oct 21:** The Muslim group then met the ambassadors of Muslim countries in Denmark to intervene. Ambassadors of 11 Muslim countries asked to meet the Prime Minister to discuss the issue. Prime Minister Rasmussen refused to meet them too.  
**Oct 27:** A coalition of 11 Danish Muslim groups files a criminal complaint against *Jyllands-Posten*. On January 7<sup>th</sup>, a Copenhagen prosecutor decides not to press charges against *Jyllands-Posten*.  
\* \* \* \* \*
- Early December:** Only after facing slight from Prime Minister Rasmussen, the Muslims in Denmark decided to take their campaign outside Denmark. A 43-page dossier was put together and the group’s first delegation went to **Egypt** and met with the grand mufti, Shaykh Tantawy, Foreign Minister Ahmed



About Geith and the head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa. The group also met various Egyptian media outlets.

= The Egyptian government and the Arab League both summoned the Danish ambassador to Egypt for talks.

= The Egyptian foreign minister takes the dossier with him to the Mecca meeting of Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in early December where he showed it around. On **December 9<sup>th</sup>**: 57 Muslim nations of OIC condemn the "desecration of the image" of the Prophet.

Another delegation of Danish Muslims visited **Lebanon** where they met the grand mufti, Shaykh Muhammad Rashid Kabbani and the Shi'ite leader, Sayyid Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah as well as the patriarch of the Maronite Church, Nasrallah Sfeir. The delegation also appeared in the al-Manar TV which is viewed all across the middle-east.

A member of this second delegation also visited **Syria** and met the grand mufti, Shaykh Ahmad Badruddin Hassaoun.

= The Jordanian Parliament and many Arab governments condemned the cartoons.

**Jan 10:** A Christian newspaper in Norway, *Magazinet*, reprints the cartoons citing press freedom to show solidarity with the Danes.

**Jan 26:** Saudi Arabia withdraws its ambassador and initiates a boycott of Danish goods.

**Jan 29:** Libya also closes its embassy in Denmark. Palestinians burn Danish flags..

**Jan 30:** *Jyllands-Posten* says on its Web page that it regrets offending Muslims and apologizes but stands by its decision to print the cartoons.

**Jan 31:** The Danish Muslim group demands a clearer apology.

**Feb 1:** Newspapers around Europe reprint the cartoons in defence of press freedom.

**Feb:** Protests start all over the Muslim world as well as by Muslims in the West. Feb 3 saw 50,000 people demonstrating in Gaza. Feb 5 saw protests in Beirut setting fire to the Danish Embassy. Danish and Norwegian embassies are set on fire by mobs in Damascus. On the same day, Iran recalls its ambassador back from Denmark. Feb 6: five people are killed in protests in Afghanistan. Feb 7: three more people are killed in protests in Afghanistan and the Danish Embassy is attacked in Tehran. Feb 8: three more people are killed at protests in Afghanistan.

**Feb 10:** Rose, the Editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, takes a leave of absence from work.<sup>6</sup>

This clearly shows that Muslims are not just a bunch of over-sensitive people who go around protesting at everything. Only when they realized that their sensibilities are not respected in the same way as the sensibilities of others, did they feel oppressed by the double standard of Western democracies — and the oppressed has the right to complain.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### References:

1. *Nahjul Balagha*, sermon 216.
2. *The Economist* (Feb 11, 2006) p. 24.
3. *New York Times*, Feb 9, 2006.
4. *Ottawa Citizen*, Feb 15, 2006.
5. *Time* (Canadian edition) Feb 20, 2006, p. 16.
6. The sequence of events has been compiled from various sources including *Time* magazine and *New York Times* mentioned earlier.

Say:

**"If your fathers, your sons,  
your brothers, your spouses, or your relatives,  
and the wealth that you have acquired,  
and the business whose slackening you fear, and the houses that you like  
are dearer to you**

**than God & His Messenger & striving in His cause,  
then wait until God brings forth His decision (against you).**

**And Allah does not guide the sinful people."**

**(The Qur'an 9:24)**

**"Verily those who hurt Allah and His Messenger,  
Allah curses them in this world and the hereafter,  
and He has prepared for them a humiliating chastisement."**

**(The Qur'an 33:57)**

**Vol. 1 \* 17 Muharram 1427 \* 16 February 2006 \* No. 3**

Tel: (905) 707-0982 muhammad57@rogers.com Fax: (905) 737-9781