



## **ESTABLISHING THE LIMITS OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND THE BEST APPROACH TO RESPOND TO BLASPHEMY**

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Freedom of speech and expression is the cornerstone of any democratic government. Islam also equates freedom of speech and expression with human dignity. This freedom ensures free flow of ideas in social and political spheres, making possible the smooth functioning of democracy where everyone's opinion is duly heard. In fact, if freedom of speech was to be taken away from the religious world, then it would have been simply impossible for the Prophets and missionaries to carry out with their works; because these holy personages normally come with a message which, in most cases, is diametrically opposed to the cherished views, customs and beliefs of the larger section of the people – a message they are not willing to hear in anyway.

But should this freedom of expression be taken to any level that one may so desire, at least in a politically structured society? Where can we draw the thin line between expression of opinion and for example a hate speech? Should there be a legal sanction imposed when one crosses the 'limits' in exercising his/her freedom of speech?

Allah the Almighty states in the Holy Quran that: *And when thou seest those who engage in vain discourse concerning Our signs, then turn thou away from them until they engage in a discourse other than that. (6:69)*

In this verse, Allah the almighty has given a golden principle on freedom of speech which is full of wisdom. It first points out that it is humanly impossible to refrain man from the words he is likely to utter, as humans do not control others thought processes. However, the best approach in preventing such a vain speech, once uttered, is to register your displeasure by leaving the assembly of such a useless discourse.

Generally, people speak insolently about individuals, principles or events that they denigrate and don't have much respect for – probably due to ignorance, prejudice, misinformation or misrepresentation. But just as respect cannot be forced from people, it also becomes quite difficult to restrict people on what to say, or at least, on how to think at any point in time about a certain person, event or ideology. Islam therefore advocates that continuous education, respectful interaction, decent conduct and refined intellectual arguments should always be employed in the exchange of religious and political ideas.

As a matter of fact, Islam even enjoins on the people who disagree with the Islamic principles to come forward with explanation of what they deem to be the right path, so that the Truth can be conclusively established. The Holy Quran states: *Or have you a clear authority? Then provide your Book if you are truthful. (37:157-158)*

It is human nature that when a man sees someone in danger or distress, he naturally feels sympathy for him and tries to save him. One never feels hatred for someone who is in danger. No one will stand on a shore of a sea and gladly watch a person drown. Thus, if people of a religious sect or certain political ideology are truly convinced of their beliefs or principles as being the best in alleviating mankind from its woes and difficulties, then it is only natural that they would be very tolerant and accommodative to whatever utterances or deeds the 'erring' class might put up, in their quest to save them. To exhibit a

volatile and intolerable demeanor in such a circumstance will only contradict your claim to being the custodian of the key to human problems as well as exposing your double standards.

No doubt there can't be any precise parameters imposed on one's freedom of expression, however Islam strongly advises that for the sake of social harmony and progress, words which are devoid of incitement, mockery, vanity, prejudice, vulgarities, falsehood and obscenities should always be spoken and at their right occasion. The Holy Quran states: *Tell My servants to be courteous in their speech. (17:54)*

Intrinsically linked to this subject also is the concept of blasphemy. Blasphemy is defined as the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God or something considered sacred or inviolable (Merriam-Webster dictionary). Regrettably, some religious clerics incite the Muslim masses to react violently to words and acts of blasphemy against the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup>. It is their belief that, love for the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> sometimes demands extreme actions including murder.

But there is not a single Quranic verse, not a single tradition or action of the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> that supports physical punishment for any acts of blasphemy. Allah the Almighty did not allow the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> to prescribe any physical punishment to those who were blasphemous towards him. In his book 'Islam's Response to Contemporary Issues', the 4<sup>th</sup> Khalifah of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Hazrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad<sup>r</sup> beautifully writes:

"Let me come to the most sensitive area—more sensitive in the sense that the Muslims of today are more sensitive to blasphemy against the Holy Founder<sup>saw</sup> of Islam than blasphemy against anything else—even God! Yet there is a case of blasphemy so serious that it is recorded in the Holy Quran itself, which speaks of Abdullah bin Ubayy bin Salul, known in the history of Islam as the Chief of Hypocrites. Once returning from an expedition, Abdullah bin Ubayy declared in the company of others that the moment they returned to Medina, the noblest would expel the meanest among the Medinites

*They say, 'If we return to Medina, the most exalted will, surely, drive out therefrom the most mean,' while true honor belongs to Allah and to His Messenger<sup>saw</sup> and the believers; but the hypocrites know not. (63:3)*

Everyone understood the implied insult to the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup>. They were seething with indignation and rage to the extent that, if permitted, they would have most certainly put Abdullah bin Ubayy to the sword. It is reported authentically that tempers were running so high at this incident that no less a person than the son of Abdullah bin Ubayy himself approached the Holy Founder<sup>saw</sup> of Islam seeking permission to kill his father with his own hands. The son argued that if anyone else did so, he might later on, in ignorance, entertain the thought of revenge against his father's killer.

For centuries, the Arabs were accustomed to take revenge at even the smallest insult hurled at them or their close relative. Perhaps, this custom was what the son had in mind. But the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> refused to grant his request nor did he permit anyone else from among his Companions to punish the hypocrite, Abdullah bin Ubayy, in any manner whatsoever. Having returned to Medina after the expedition, Abdullah bin Ubayy continued to live in peace. When he died at last, a natural death of course, to the surprise of everyone, the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> gave Abdullah's son his own shirt so that he could enshroud his father's body for burial—a singular act of blessing, indeed, which must have left the other Companions yearning to barter it from the son at the cost of all their possessions. Not only that, the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> decided to lead his funeral prayer.

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This decision must have deeply disturbed many of his Companions who could never forgive Abdullah for the grievous offence mentioned above. Yet, it fell to the lot of Umar<sup>ra</sup>, who later succeeded the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> as the Second Caliph to give voice to their suppressed uneasiness. It is reported that as the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> was proceeding to the funeral, Umar<sup>ra</sup> suddenly stepped forward and stood in the way begging the Prophet<sup>saw</sup> to change his decision. In doing so, Umar<sup>ra</sup> reminded the Prophet<sup>saw</sup> of the verse of the Holy Quran in which reference is made to some known hypocrite on whose behalf intercession would not be accepted even if the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> prayed for him seventy times.

Incidentally, the number seventy should not be taken too literally because, according to Arab usage, it was only employed to indicate a large number. However, the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> smiled and responded: Stand aside, Umar<sup>ra</sup>. I know better. If I know God would not forgive him even if I seek forgiveness seventy times, I would seek forgiveness for him more than seventy times. The Prophet<sup>saw</sup> then led the funeral prayer. This is a fitting rebuttal to those who are crying themselves hoarse in demanding death for the blasphemer who dares to insult the Holy Founder<sup>saw</sup> of Islam and nothing but death". (pp 41-43)

Few years back when the French magazine, Charlie Hebdo, published a derogatory caricature of the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup>, the mainstream Muslims reacted to this blasphemy by pulling down structures, burning tires and causing so much mayhem and brutalities. Speaking on this very incident in his sermon delivered on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2011, the 5<sup>th</sup> Khalifa to the Promised Messiah<sup>as</sup> and Supreme Head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad<sup>atba</sup> beautifully explained that, to burn tires in such a circumstance was going to protect the honor of the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> for just five minutes; whilst the peaceful approach adopted by the Ahmadi Muslims (i.e. elucidating the noble character of the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> to the world and invoking countless Durood [salutations of peace and blessings] on him in such despicable times) was going to protect the exalted status and honor of the Holy Prophet<sup>saw</sup> forever!

Blasphemy thus becomes an extremely painful but profound opportunity within which the public's thoughts are properly reshaped - an unfortunate act which is condemned on moral and ethical grounds only, without any prescribed physical punishment.

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