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INSULTING ISLAM AND THE MUSLIM RESPONSE

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Allahumma salli alaa sayyidinaa Muhammadin wa baarik wa sallim

INSULTING ISLAM AND THE MUSLIM RESPONSE

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

We note that a number of publications in the past which were designed to insult Islam in general, Almighty Allah (swt), the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbh), the Holy Qur'an, the laws of Islam and the Muslim Practices and Beliefs in general. Some of these were published in various print and digital media throughout the world – particularly in European countries.

Instances of these publications have included in the recent past the drawing of cartoons, comics and caricatures of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbh), e.g. in publications like Jyllands-Posten in Denmark and Charlie Hebdo in France. In each instance, the Muslim response was vociferous and, in some cases violent, with the resulting loss of life of some of the actors involved in the process of publication.

We note that this issue is complex and embodies a number of different aspects that are driven by various factors, which need to be carefully dealt with.

BLASPHEMY AND INSULTING ISLAM

We recognise that Islam has always been subjected to insults. Attacks have focused on the principles of Islam, the linkage to Arabs and Middle Eastern cultures, the spread of Islam, and central institutions within Islam. This is not new. (Armstrong 2001)

We note that the Holy Qur'an records instances where people have targeted the Prophets of Islam, with over 200 Qur'anic verses that record the insulting or acts of violence towards the Prophets of Islam. From Qur'an and Ahadith, we can see that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbh) was subject to much ridicule in his lifetime. Acts of insult and even violence were perpetrated by the people of Makkah, Taif, and in his interactions with Bedouins, which are all recorded in Qur'an and Hadith.

These records all serve to establish precedent and guide Muslims on how to deal with situations of this nature.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Islam recognises that as human beings, we have freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and essentially the complete freedom to think, speak and act in any way we choose. However,

Islamic regulations balance individual rights with social responsibility, and in this context imposes limitations on what should be said and how. These include the following:

- Hadith narrated by Abu Huraira: "Whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, then let him speak good (khair) or remain silent." (Agreed)
- Hadith: "The person who utters a word which meets with Allah's favour may think it has not been heard, yet for this Allah will raise him to a higher level of Paradise. Conversely, the person who utters a word that stirs Allah to anger may give no thought to what he said, only to have Allah cast him in Hell for seventy years." (Tirmidhi)
- Hadith narrated by Mu'az ibn Jabal: 'I was in company with the Prophet in a travel, and one day I was close to him while we were travelling. So I said: "O Messenger of Allah, tell me of an act which will take me into Paradise and will keep me away from Hell fire...shall I not tell you of the foundation of all of that?" I said: "Yes, O Messenger of Allah," and he took hold of his tongue and said: "Restrain this." I said: "O Prophet of Allah, will what we say be held against us?" He said: "May your mother be bereaved of you, Mu'az! Is there anything that topples people on their faces - or he said on their noses into Hell-fire other than the harvest of their tongues?"' (Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Nasa'i, Ibn Maajah)

The Western World emphasizes freedom of speech as sacrosanct and a fundamental human right, and has engrained it in their foundation documents:

- Article 11 of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,' emanating from the French revolution, states: "The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law." Approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789
- The First Amendment to the US Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." December 15, 1791.

- Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948 states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

This underlines an essential difference in values, which in many respects seems unresolvable. In the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (Cairo 1990), there is in Article 22 the Islamic equivalent of what the west upholds as freedom of speech, which recognises:

- a) Everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shari'ah.
- (b) Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right, and propagate what is good, and warn against what is wrong and evil according to the norms of Islamic Shari'ah
- (c) Information is a vital necessity to society. It may not be exploited or misused in such a way as may violate sanctities and the dignity of Prophets, undermine moral and ethical values or disintegrate, corrupt or harm society or weaken its faith.
- (d) It is not permitted to arouse nationalistic or doctrinal hatred or to do anything that may be an incitement to any form of racial discrimination.

The essential issue as it relates to Freedom of Speech is a difference of core values – in the case of Islam to show restraint in expression so as not to condescend; and in western countries in which the values allow for complete freedom of expression, regardless of the extent of offense that results. **On this difference of values there is no compromise or middle ground that can be achieved**, so that we can agree to disagree, and as Muslims we accept this, as the Qur'an instructs in Chapter 109 "For you is your way and for me is mine." (Qur'an 109:6)

FREEDOM TO BLASPHEME

In Islam, we are instructed to not to provoke, slander, ridicule or jest with other groups, based on the Qur'anic ayat, "One group of people should not make fun of another group of people. Maybe they (the latter) are better than they (the former)." (Qur'an 49:11)

Islam recognises that non-Muslims would be tempted to, and engage in ridicule of Islam and its various aspects. This sentiment is epitomised by the author Lawrence Krauss, who in the Journal of Science, Religion and Culture stated:

“No idea should be sacred in the modern world. Instead, in order for us to progress as a species, every claim, every idea should be subject to debate, intelligent discussion, and when necessary ridicule. Satire is perhaps one of the most important gifts we have to inspire us to re-examine our own lives and our own ideologies. If every other area of human endeavour is open to ridicule, then certainly so should religion. The notion that a cartoon, which presents an image of a historical figure, is so blasphemous to provoke violence is repugnant to anyone who believes that free and intelligent discourse is the basis of a civilized world.”(Krauss 2015)

This propensity to blaspheme under the banner of freedom of speech is an extension of the difference in values that manifest between Islam and the West, and there are distinct positions with no middle ground. Krauss mentioned the need to “...encourage even ridicule of the sacred Qur’an in the public media. The more frequently and openly this appears, the less threatening it will seem, and the more acceptable it will be for believers to actually intellectually engage rather than emotionally and violently act.”

We see this position as irresponsible, naïve and reckless, and not in the teachings of Islam. We condemn outright the behaviour of any individual or entity that serves to jeer or mock others on the basis of their ideologies or beliefs.

We expect that the ridicule and blasphemy would continue by those upholding these values, under cover of free speech. It may be genuinely driven by belief in core values, or it may be a method of provocation – but only Allah can judge intentions, and He knows best.

Notwithstanding, we need to consider what the Muslim response should be in face of such acts and utterances, and this would be driven by what Islam guides in terms of response and conduct.

MUSLIM RESPONSE

It is natural for Muslims to become offended by the ridicule and un-Islamic utterances and actions of non-Muslims. Some may even be provoked to retaliate, and can use – as some have in the past, misinterpretation of Shariah, as Islamic guidance for the basis of retaliation.

We note that this can be amplified by on-going political and socio-economic situations across both the Middle East and Europe – The realities of immigration and current economic recession in Europe alongside the realities of oil, political and ideological warfare in the Middle East. We recognise as well the rate of the growth of Islam in Europe, which would also serve to ‘threaten’ core values and force reactions such as those in the

publications referenced. Some have even attributed all the emergence and perpetuation of the situations to western interference, and have castigated them accordingly.

It must also be recognised that some may want to use this sentiment to mobilise support for their own ends and motives – be it religious or political, self-serving or selfless. That these issues converge allow for some to interpret their actions as fighting against oppression, and play on the emotions and camaraderie of the Muslim Ummah to mobilise support.

Whilst oppression may be a relevant argument for some issues, we note that **oppression is not the issue of the publication of offensive content about Islam in general or the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in particular**, and therefore cannot be treated with as such, nor evoke reactions as if it were.

It must be noted that some responses are extreme and violent, and cannot be justified by arguments based on any of the verses of the Holy Qur'an that treat with Muslims' reaction to Fitnah and fighting in the Way of Allah.

The actions of persons to murder the publishers and authors of the Anti-Islamic cartoons are unlawful in Islam and are also condemned outright, since the Qur'an tells us in this regard as follows:

- "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for Allah does not love transgressors." (Qur'an 2:190).

The killing of the authors and staff of the offending publications may be seen as an act that is a transgression against Allah's guidance. Rather, the Muslim's response to such acts and utterances should be tempered by the Islamic guidance that treats with such issues, and include the following:

- "And when you see those who engage in [offensive] discourse concerning Our verses, then turn away from them until they enter into another conversation. And if Satan should cause you to forget, then do not remain after the reminder with the wrongdoing people." (Qur'an 6:68)
- "Hold on to forgiveness, command what is right and turn away from the ignorant." (Qur'an 7:199)
- "And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel [evil] by that [deed] which is better; and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] as though he was a devoted friend. But none is granted it except those who are

patient, and none is granted it except one having a great portion [of good].” (Qur’an 41:34-35)

- “And whoever is patient and forgives – indeed that is of the matters [requiring] determination.” (Qur’an 42:43)
- “And the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them [harshly], they say [words of] Peace” (Qur’an 25:63)

Muslims are reminded that Islam directs us to “invite (all) to the way of thy Lord, with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue with them in ways that are best, and most gracious,” (Qur’an 16:125)

Furthermore, we are encouraged to pray for them, as our Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) prayed for those Meccans who acted condescendingly and abusively towards him, when he said “O Allah, Guide my people, for they do not know.”

Allah knows best.

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This paper has been approved by the serving members and contributing non-members of the Majlis ul Ulamaa Shariah Council on this 12th day of August 2015.

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