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Vishwaroopam & Free Expression

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There is always a hue and cry against those activities that Muslims feel are derogatory to Islam. A recent example is the South Indian film Vishwaroopam. Such behaviour in the name of Islam is nothing but de-Islamisation of Islam as it is quite alien to Islamic scriptures.

The so-called derogatory activities are not a recent phenomenon. It was very common during the prophetic and post-prophetic periods regarded as the golden era of Islam. What was the response of the Quran or the Prophet of Islam towards this phenomenon?

The Quran and the Sunnah or practices of the Prophet tell us that the response was quite positive. Instead of condemning such things, the Prophet always availed of their occurrence as an opportunity. A Quranic verse is instructive: "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation and deal with disputes in the best manner" (16:125).

It means Muslims must deal with dispute in the best manner possible. That is, they respond in a positive rather than negative way. Another verse tells us that if Muslims follow this course of action, they will find that what was apparently a disadvantage has turned into an advantage: "Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel evil with what is better; then you will see that one who was once your enemy has become your dearest friend" (41:34). It means: don't take dispute as an expression of enmity; take it as a misunderstanding and try to remove that misunderstanding, and the concerned person will reform his opinion. In this way, a dispute is turned into a positive discussion.

This kind of culture can be maintained only when there is freedom of expression. Islam believes in rational discussion for it leads to clarification and consensus. The Quran does not com-

mand Muslims to prevent others from speaking against Islam, but instead commands Muslims not to make any statement that offends others: "And do not abuse those whom they call upon besides God, lest exceeding the limits they should abuse God out of ignorance" (6:108).

It means that Muslims must themselves take the responsibility to maintain normalcy between themselves and others. And, if any controversy arises, then Muslims must deal with it in a wise manner; that is, they must defuse it instead of allowing things to flare up.

Freedom of expression is not an evil; it is good for human development. According to the Quran, God Himself has set an example. He allowed the angels to express their dissent at the time of the creation of Adam (2:30).

The Quranic term for freedom of expression is shura (42:38). Shura literally means consultation, in other words, culture of discussion. That is, taking dispute as a point of discussion. That was the Prophet's normal habit. He always used to take any kind of dispute as a point of discussion and tried to clear it up with reason.

Freedom of expression has been allowed throughout Islamic history. It was never considered taboo. There are numerous examples of freedom of expression leading to intellectual development. Qazi Abu Yusuf in his book Kitab al-Kharaj has referred to several such issues that were controversial between the Muslims and their Caliph. The Caliph never discouraged discussion. He always invited people to make known their differences, and sometimes there were long discussions until the matter was settled.

Freedom of expression is good for both sides. Cancelling freedom of expression is tantamount to cancelling intellectual development. This will halt the whole process of intellectual development, not only for others, but for Muslims themselves.



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