

Freedom of expression and Islam

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

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Excerpt:

In his talk, the Maulana explains that Islam greatly believes in freedom of expression. As such blasphemy in Islam is a subject of intellectual discussion rather than a subject of physical punishment.

He expounds how the concept of blasphemy is completely alien to the original teachings of Islam. Before the advent of Islam, difference of belief was also a punishable act. They used to punish on matters of belief just as on matters of social crime. This old practice is called religious persecution in history. Islam abolished this practice and brought about the culture of dissent and freedom of expression.

Muslims generally advocate the theory that freedom of expression is good, but that no one has the right to hurt the religious sentiments of others. This theory is quite illogical. Freedom is not a self-acquired right. It is God, who, because of His scheme of putting man to the test, has given man total freedom. Then the modern secular concept of freedom is that everyone is free provided he does not inflict physical harm upon others. In such a situation, the above kind of demand is tantamount to abolishing two things: firstly, to abolishing the divine scheme, and secondly, to abolishing the modern secular norm. Neither goal is achievable.

Lesson:

The life of Prophet Muhammad is a model and not a matter of pride. While the former arouses a sense of adherence to his way of life, the latter arouses vengeance. So the hue and cry against the so-called disrespect of the Prophet is simply untenable. By adopting this policy, Muslims can make themselves permanently negative but they cannot change the system of the world.

Introduction

On the publication of the Satanic verses by Salman Rushdie in 1988, the Muslim reaction was to have him killed forthwith; he had committed an unpardonable offense against Islam and the Prophet. All over the world, Muslims demanded his head. They were not prepared to settle for anything less than that. Over two decades have passed, while Salman Rushdie is alive and under British security, those who produced these fatwas demanding his head, have died.

In a similar incident, when the Denmark cartoon was published, the Muslims reacted in much the same manner. The same set of events were also repeated at the time of the American movie, “Innocence of Muslims”. It is unfortunate that since the last twenty five years, Muslims worldwide have engaged themselves in vain protests against such instances.

Recently, BBC London covered a protest procession that took place in a Muslim country. The banner read, *“To hell with your freedom of expression,”* and this led to a debate between the secular minds and Muslim fundamentalists. Secularists advocate that making a movie, writing a book or an article is the right of a person till he does not indulge in violence. This is in conformance with universal laws. On the other hand are Muslims, who say that they would not accept such a right. I am perhaps the only exception in the Muslim world who supports the secular stance.

In the modern age, all campaigns spread like wildfire. Reactions given by Muslims have given the impression that Muslims are vengeful and violent people. An image has been created in the world that Islam is against freedom of expression whereas secular civilization supports it.

After an in-depth study of Islam from its source, I can firmly conclude that it is completely baseless to say that Islam does not support freedom of expression. In fact, Islam sanctions freedom of expression in the absolute sense.

Examples

The first telling example to be set forth in the Quran is that of the angel’s reaction to God’s decision to create human beings and settle them on the earth as His creatures. When the Lord told the angles of this, they remonstrated:

“Will you place someone there who will cause corruption on it and shed blood...?” (2:30)

This was an expression of dissent against God Himself. But God did not disapprove of this. Instead, he simply explained the matter to the angels, after which they were satisfied. This shows that putting a curb on dissent or criticism, or upbraiding dissenters, is not the Islamic way. The method of Islam is to listen to opposite viewpoints and then attempt, by well reasoned argument, to remove the grounds for dissent. God established this example in the beginning of creation to convey that freedom of expression is an absolute right of man that no one can abolish. Any case of dissent must be dealt with reason and logic. Let us understand why is freedom an absolute right.

When God created man to dwell on earth, He decreed that he might enjoy freedom of will. This freedom given to man was for the purpose of putting him to test. According to the Quran

He created death and life so that He might test you, and find out which of you is best in conduct.

(67:2)

A test essentially demands freedom of action. This freedom of action was necessary to create conditions for testing whether man would use or misuse freedom. Therefore freedom of expression and dissent is inherent in the creation plan of God itself and are very much in accordance with Islam. The only condition is that man must not engage in violence and become harmful for anyone.

Let me relate an instance to illustrate the modern concept of freedom. When America became free from European occupation, an American was walking on the street, swinging his arms. In doing so, he hit the nose of a passerby. The passerby asked why he hit him. The American said that America was free and he was exercising his freedom. The passerby said, “You are free but your freedom ends where my nose begins!”

This example clearly demonstrates the idea of freedom in Islam. A person who commits blasphemy has the freedom to do so. A believer must understand that Islam is an ideology, not a sword. The fear of sword was instilled in the days of kingship when an executioner, upon king's orders, would decapitate anyone who expressed dissent. This culture is not promoted by Islam.

Islam stands on the strength of its ideology, not on fear. If I assert that the sum of two and two is four and am implicated for it, this fact would still remain unchanged. For example, Galileo's idea of heliocentricity was in direct conflict with Church's idea of geocentricity. Church being supremely powerful implicated Galileo on account of blasphemy.

As per an anecdotal account, when Galileo was being tried in the Court, he gave consent to the geocentric theory in order to save himself. However, as soon as he stepped out, he asserted, *'Well, the truth is that Earth is still revolving around the sun!'*

Similarly, a book written to defame Islam cannot change the truth of Islam. In return, adherents of Islam are also free to write a book and present their point. But engaging in killing and violence is highly unislamic and uncalled for.

Why have Muslims become so emotional?

It was the news report of a certain protest that helped me understand this phenomenon better. One of the protestors carried the following slogan, *"Our prophet is our honour."* I realized that the root-cause of the problem is that the present-day Muslims consider Prophet as their pride. It was this sense of pride which had made them so emotional. But the question is whether the Prophet is our pride? Does the Quran say that Prophet is our pride? According to Hadith

"Whoever introduces into our matter (religion) that which is not a part of it, will have it (his innovation) rejected." (Bukhari)

The matter pertaining to considering Prophet Muhammad as the pride stands rejected prima facie. According to the Quran

You have indeed in the Prophet of God a good example (33:21)

The life of Prophet Muhammad is a model and not a matter of pride. While the former arouses a sense of adherence to his way of life, the latter arouses vengeance. As such, the concept of pride is a clear innovation (*bidat*).

It is noteworthy that blasphemy finds no mention in the dictionary of Islam. It is only an innovated term, which was brought to fore two hundred years after the Prophet. This was a time Muslim empire expanded vastly and a large number of people entered within the fold of Islam. In those days of kingship, the religion of the king was the religion of the state: when Constantine adopted Christianity, his kingdom spread across entire Europe, also accepted Christianity. Likewise, when Muslim empire was established, mass conversions took place and people embraced Islam. Unfortunately, the new entrants were not trained adequately and so they embraced Islam while still harbouring ancient ideas and thoughts. This led to islamisation of non-islam.

For example, the Christian concept of blasphemy was given an Arabic name, “shatm” and popularised. This was a clear example of bidat (innovation) where non-Islamic traditions are given an Islamic identity. The author of the book “God Delusion” perceives that Islam believes in thought crime but this is entirely wrong assumption. As per Islamic teachings, freedom of expression can be manifested as a book or a speech; the only caveat is that it should not involve violence else it becomes a punishable crime.

Freedom of expression: a common view

According to the Quran, there are only two basis on which a man’s knowledge can be based: Revelation and Reason.

“Bring me a Book revealed before this or some other vestige of knowledge, if you are telling the truth.” (46:4)

The Quranic stand is in conformity with the creation plan of God. Man has been settled on Earth for the purpose of putting him to test (*Darul Imtihaan*). Freedom is everyone’s birthright, so no one can abolish anyone’s freedom. People are free to use their freedom as they please, if you disagree with the point of view of your fellow beings, you can express your views in a rational manner; you must try to address their minds (do dawah work). But guns and bombs are no option for a believer. This is the stance of revealed religions and secular philosophy also endorses this view. Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed by over hundred countries considers freedom of expression as an absolute right. So, both in the context of secular reason and religion, freedom of expression is an absolute right. In the light of the above, if a believer asserts, “to hell with your freedom of expression!” it is tantamount to hypocrisy.

To the West, freedom is *summum bonum* or the greatest good because it encourages development. The Roman Empire, which prohibited freedom of expression, did not let any new development surface in almost two thousand years of its existence. Their rulers were wary of any new idea lest it may harm their kingship! As per anecdotal accounts, when Roman armies entered Greece, they saw a Roman philosopher sitting on the ground, involved in some working. This philosopher, who was engaged in solving a mathematical problem on ground due to lack of paper was beheaded because he was engaged in an “unusual” activity. This era in Europe lasted until the French Revolution. Ancient Arabia was no different. At the time of Prophet Muhammad, Kaaba was a religious centre and attracted several pilgrims.

On one such occasion, the Prophet visited the tent of the Banu Shyban ibn Tha'alaba in Mecca, and talked with their elders. They were impressed by the Prophet's words but finally decided that their position, on the border of Persia, was too precarious for them to subscribe to a new message. As their spokesman, Hani Ibn Qubaisa, put it, they had made pacts with the Persian Emperor, and 'it might be that the kings will not take kindly to the message that you preach.' (Al Bidayah wa-al Nihayah)

This was because in the days of kingship, there was no possibility of exercising dissent. In fact, dissent was the forbidden tree of that era. And, when the prevalent culture was polytheism, the message of monotheism could not be taken to, kindly.

In Europe, it was the Church that stood in opposition to new developments and ideas. As a result, several movements took place against the Church. A long series of revolutions led to renaissance. The essence of that era can be gauged by Rousseau's 'Social Contract,' the first line of which reads, 'Man was born free but I see him in chains!'

The absolute monarchy that had ruled France for centuries collapsed as a result of the French Revolution which was a period of radical, social and political upheaval in France the impact of which rippled throughout Europe. These developments marked the dawn of the modern era, and led to the spread of democratic ideals throughout Europe. Absolutism was overthrown and the power of the Church were confined to Vatican. Further details on this can be found in John William Draper's book, 'Conflict between Science and Religion.'

The ending of monarchy and spread of democracy as well as confinement of Church to Vatican paved way for freedom of expression. This was followed by development of scientific temper; discoveries and inventions followed. The three-dimensional spatial arrangement comprising matter, plant and animal was now recognized to be four-dimensional, with moving matter being a new addition. That was the beginning of progress and development and the modern civilization came into being.

Present-day Muslims

Present-day Muslims utilize all the modern amenities that the Western civilization brought into being – means of communication, transport, multimedia, and education – and at the same time raise slogans against the very freedom of expression as a result of which all these developments came into being.

It means that though the present-day Muslims revolt and protest on one hand, they are still using all the amenities that West developed. If Muslims forego the amenities brought about by age of freedom and free expression, they would go back to the era of camels.

I once asked an American Professor, “What is the secret of progress of American civilization?” He replied saying, “Dissent! American civilisation considers dissent as the sacred right of every individual.” Till there was no freedom of expression, there was no progress in this world and if freedom of expression is removed from this world, progressive development would come to a standstill.

By protesting against the Western freedom of expression while simultaneously benefitting from the amenities that came into being as a result of this culture, Muslims have succumbed to sheer hypocrisy. Will a Muslim uproot himself from America just because Islam is getting defamed? I asked an Asian Muslim living in America why he lives there if he has so many issues with the American civilization? He said, *“Man would be where his rizq (livelihood) is!”* I said, *“It is ironical how in a “Satanic” country, his livelihood is taken care of whereas his own country, which he considers to be Islamic, fails to provide means for his sustenance!”*

Quranic stand

Quran has over two hundred verses which convey how Prophets in all times were disrespected. According to a verse

Alas for human beings! They ridicule every messenger that comes to them. (36:30)

In the days of the Prophet a large number of Rushdies and cartoon publishers existed, but none of them were beheaded or protested against for having insulted Islam and its prophet. On the contrary, in the times of the Prophet, the principle of countering words with words was followed. That is why those who spoke out against Islam no matter to what lengths they went were not penalised in any way.

The Prophet’s name was Muhammad, meaning the praised one or the praiseworthy. But when the Meccans became his most dire opponents, they themselves coined a name for the Prophet, ‘Muzammam,’ on the pattern of ‘Muhammad,’ Muzammam meaning condemned. They used to heap abuses on him calling him by this epithet of Muzammam. But the Prophet was never enraged at this distorted version of his name. All he said in return was: “Aren’t you surprised that God has turned

away the abuses of the Quraysh from me. They abuse a person by the name of *Muzammam*. Whereas I am *Muhammad* (Ibn Hisham, 1/379).

Prophet's example demonstrates that Islam does not teach one to be easily provoked, even in cases of extreme provocation.

According to the Quran, the hands of the thief should be severed if he is found guilty of committing a theft. In other words, Quran classifies theft as crime and so a punishment is decreed for it. The Quran tells us that since ancient times God has sent prophets in succession to every town and every community. It says, moreover, that the contemporaries of all of these prophets adopted a negative attitude towards them. Even though the Quran mentions that every Prophet was disrespected, it does not decree a punishment for those who committed this act? The question is why there is a reference of the crime (disrespect) but no punishment has been ordained for it? This is because there is difference between the two. One is a crime like theft, where punishment must be meted out. The other is the case of showing disrespect, where instead of meting out punishment, dawah work has to be undertaken. Such a person must be engaged with in a rational discussion. Committing violence in the name of avenging disrespect is totally unislamic.

Islam is a religion of blessing and as such it cannot be a religion of flogging. It means that Islam is a religion that appeals the nature and reason of man and so it is capable of addressing the rationale of man. There is no need to use a sword or a gun. Islam helps man find the way to mercy, truth and paradise and it must be realized that people can understand truth when counseled and not when dealt with violently. In response to such instances, Prophet Muhammad used to send Companions to recite the Quran (and companions came to be called as *mukris* or those who recite). The principle that is derived is that in response of acts of disrespect or blasphemy, Quran was recited. Today, Muslims are in the era of printing press and if acts of disrespect are making news, Muslims must engage in Quran distribution on a large scale to address curious minds. This is the model of Prophet Muhammad.

Demonstration and violence is not endorsed by Islam. Islam gives dawah as a mission to its believers. According to Islam, believers must only focus on doing dawah work and spreading the word of God; punishment is God's domain. This is clearly mentioned in the Quran. People propagating violence are acting in contradiction to Quranic teachings

So, [O Prophet!] exhort them: your task is only to exhort, you are not their keeper. (88:21-22)

Conclusion

This violence perpetrated by Muslims for the last few decades has distorted the image of Islam in the minds of people. Islam is seen as a religion of violence and is perceived to be against peace and freedom of expression. It is time now that present-day Muslims take up the responsibility for building the image of Islam. Muslims must refrain from performing any such acts which seem to ratify the presently held misconceptions.

Towards the end, I would want to draw your attention to some books which are considered to represent Islam's view on the issue of disrespect of Prophet (*Shatm*). These are:

Al-sarim- al maslool	by Ibn Taimiyyah (600 years since the first period of Islam)
Al-saif-al-maslool	by Subuki (700 years since the first period of Islam)
Tambih al-vulaat	by Ibn Abideen-ash-shaami (1000 years since the first period of Islam)

It is important to understand that none of the above (or any other book) was written to address this topic when Islam was in its first period. At that time, books existed on all other topics, save this. This clarifies the fact that such instances were considered a non-issue until the first period of Islamic history, which was devoid of transgression. In later times, as more people embraced Islam through mass conversions and because of lack of adequate training, they could not forego their earlier traditions and ended up Islamising the non-Islamic notions.

Quran and Hadith form the yardstick that will determine the value of our actions. This is not adjudged on the basis of emotions. He, whose sentiments are hurt, has the responsibility of managing his emotions; others cannot be blamed for it. Let me relate an instance to illustrate this point. A host invited a guest for dinner. During dinner, the host placed among other things, fresh honey in front of the guest. Seeing the guest consume sumptuously quantities of honey, the host said, "*Ye shahad dil ko jalata hai*" (*Honey burns the heart!*). The guest said, "*Jalata hai par tumhara dil jalaata hai*" (*It burns but it burns your heart!*). The lesson is that if a person's sentiments are hurt, it is his responsibility to manage it.

It must be remembered that it was Satan who became angry when God made Adam, the incharge of Earth and asked angels to bow before him. While angels agreed to the plan of God and demonstrated their universal approach, Satan became angry for not being made the incharge of Earth and demonstrated a self-centered approach.

God appreciates universal approach but the present-day Muslims have adopted a self-centered approach (and are feeling hurt!) They are unable to realise the advantages that freedom of expression offers. If they do, their approach will become opportunity centric and they would admit that freedom of expression brought about umpteen dawah opportunities. When Moses had come to Pharaoh with the message of Tawheed, Pharaoh wanted to have him killed. At this time, according to the Quran, **A believer, a man from among the people of Pharaoh, who had concealed his faith, said, ‘Would you slay a man merely because he says, “My Lord is God.” (40:28)**

That was an era when people were liable to be punished for what they said and the scope of doing dawah work was vastly limited. This is alluded to in the Quran in the following words

..whom they hated for no other reason than that they believed in God. (85:8)

Freedom of expression brought with it, immense dawah opportunities. Some may use this freedom wrongfully but it is up to us to make rightful use of it to spread the word of God. The Creator of this world has kept opportunity in every problem situation. This hope fosters positive approach. I pray God inculcates positivity in us and gives us the strength to manage and get rid of negativity.

Question – Answers

Q1: On one hand Muslims damage statues of Buddha and Mahavira and on the other they cause violence when their Prophet is disrespected. Are Muslims against or in favour of disrespecting religion?

A: This is a right observation. When man grows emotional, he develops contradictory behavior. What Muslims are doing is not in conformance with Islam because they only know their emotions and nothing else. The so-called Muslim leaders have found a way to gain cheap popularity by inciting Muslims to react. Let me cite an event from history. Ibn Taimiyyah wrote a book on the topic of disrespect of Prophet Muhammad in reaction to an instance where a Christian had said something disrespectful about the Prophet. He mobilized a crowd of people through speeches and took them to the court of the Turkish Sultan. The Sultan was angry and had Ibn Taimiyaah flogged saying that people were not even aware and it were his fiery speeches that incited them and made them negative. He sent Ibn Taimiyyah back!

Same events are being repeated today. The controversial video was not even known before the so-called Muslim leaders raised such hue and cry. Blameworthy therefore is not the common man but the clerics and leaders who misguide them through emotionally provocative speeches.

Q2: Will man go to hell or paradise as soon as he dies or after day of judgment?

A: We live in time and space and the world hereafter is beyond time and space. This aspect can be understood through Einstein's theory of relativity. Therefore what will unfold in the life hereafter cannot be reasoned out before hand. Until then, man will need to have conviction on it.

Q3: In the context of a person who did not work through life and lived penurious life, can it be said that his test is in hard times?

A: Test means that man is free to perform or not perform an action. His success and failure is determined by use or misuse of freedom. And the test paper is commensurate to man's situation.

Q4: Please explain the meaning of the frequently used term "inshalallah".

A: The present day usage of "inshalallah" is a part of culture. Neither does it have any spirit nor does it have any Islamic value. "Inshalallah" literally means "God willing" and symbolizes man's faith in God. Faith, that arises when man discovers God's greatness and realizes that everything is when God wants it to be. Muslims haven't made this discovery and they use it as a cultural phrase!

Q5: After the death of Prophet, the Arabs conquered a huge part of the World within less than 100 years. And people often look at this as a sign of spreading Islam by force. Can you clarify the motivation of the Arab armies behind wanting to conquer the world?

A: Political expansion and religious expansion are two different things. There is no proof that sword was used to spread Islam. However, there existed dynasties which in order to fulfill their political ambitions conquered newer lands but there is no proof that people were made to accept Islam per force. Swami Vivekananda wrote in his book, "Letters of Vivekananda," "*It is nonsense to say that Hindus were converted to Islam by force.*" Similarly Egypt was a large country to enter within the fold of Islam. Sir Arthur Keith, while studying the phenomenon remarked, "*Egyptians were conquered not by sword but by Quran.*" History does not prove that sword was used for religious expansion of Islam. Political expansion was a different case, specific to individuals and dynasties.

Q6: What virtues should a person inculcate within himself to develop a universal outlook?

A: Objective thinking arouses universal approach. The more objectively a person thinks the more universal he becomes. Normally people think subjectively and are not able to think keeping the entire

humanity in mind. They restrict themselves to their family, society and community. Each person therefore must introspect and get to know whether he has a self-centered or a universal approach. A man can get to know this himself and can also work on it himself.

Q7: Do you think most people can understand the Quran by simply reading it?

A: There are two levels: knowing the teachings of the Quran and abiding by it. A clear translation suffices for understanding and implementing the teachings in daily life. For example, if the Quran ordains offering prayer and the believers start doing it. In order to understand the Quran at a deeper level, which is the responsibility of clerics, a profound study is required. This is not required of all. Clerics are required to decipher the modern application of Quran and interpret it in the modern idiom. According to Hadith, this work was done by Prophets but now clerics are required to do it

Ulemas are inheritors of Prophets (Bukhari)

Unfortunately, clerics are not discharging this duty any more.

Q8: Why is it that those who are engaged in protest against blasphemy do not make a real attempt to kill the blasphemous person? Is this not hypocrisy?

A: Indeed it is hypocrisy. I met a professor, Dr. Abdus Salaam, who used to teach in an American University. He told me that a seminar was conducted in the university, at the time of Salman Rushdie's book release and a student came on stage and said that Rushdie should be killed and shouldn't be alive. Dr. Abdus Salaam came on stage and patiently said that "*Boy! You are not sincere in saying this because if you are sincere, you would have been in London!*" This is the case of present-day Muslims and this is hypocrisy. The worst aspect of this hypocrisy is that Muslims profess hatred towards the West and then proudly settle their children in West. I was in Birmingham once where I met a group of people. A person said to a Pakistani journalist that 99 of 100 Muslims are hypocrites. The journalist said, only one in a lakh would not be a hypocrite. No one objected to what he said!

Neither have people studied Islam, nor have they prayed or done dawah work for it. I was watching television and the protestors were wearing Western outfits. The clothes they wear, the amenities they use, the mobile phones and cars and everything is a product of the Western culture and using this while harbouring hatred for them is sheer hypocrisy.

Q8: What is peaceful protest?

A: Islam does not have the concept of protesting – neither peaceful nor violent. In both situations, protest is unislamic. The proof of this is that Kaaba, the most sacred mosque, housed over three hundred idols when Prophet was in Mecca but he never protested.

Q9: Why do clerics not realize that education alone can help fight ignorance and false propaganda?

A: Present-day clerics are no different from the common man, they too have become emotional. A cleric called me and told that another cleric said in a speech, “*If you disrespect me, I would say nothing, if you disrespect Muslims, we would say nothing but if you disrespect the Prophet, we would not be able to bear it!*” Throughout the world, I have not found any cleric who is an exception to this because all are seething with negative emotions.