FREE SPEECH: A LEGAL RIGHT AND A MORAL OBLIGATION

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in France the issue of free speech has become central to the discussion of the threat of terrorism and the relationship between Western societies and the Muslim world and the place of Islam in democratic societies. Unfortunately, much of this discussion has been premised upon an unbalanced understanding of free speech, and also fails to address important underlying questions of how Western societies view Muslims and how Muslims perceive how they are characterized in Western societies.

Free speech is absolutely essential to a democratic pluralistic society. Yet the right of free speech has both a legal and moral dimension. Legally we must allow individuals and groups to espouse their views no matter how vile, ignorant or bigoted they are because we cannot trust government with the power of censorship. At the same time, however, a pluralistic democratic society requires the support of a civil discourse which allows the airing of differences while supporting the dignity and respect to which all citizens are entitled, and which is necessary for all groups to feel enfranchised and vested in society. Thus, the abuse of free speech to promote hateful and bigoted images of people or to insult their religion, culture or race can only serve to undermine democratic society.

Thus, while such hateful abuses of free speech must be legally allowed, they cannot go unaddressed morally. For unless the leadership of all sectors of society strongly repudiate such abuse of free speech, it can only serve to alienate certain groups as they seek to participate in democratic society.

This is the point Pope Francis was making when he recently said free speech is not without limits, and you cannot use the right of free speech to abuse whole groups of people without inevitable negative social consequences. Free speech is not just a legal right; it is a moral obligation to maintain the civil discourse that alone can support a pluralistic democratic society.

The terrorists who committed the atrocities in France justified their actions as a response to what they said was an insulting portrayal of the Prophet Mohammed in a French magazine. Such violence is never justified and was condemned by Muslim leaders, as Muslims, Christians and Jews marched in solidarity against such criminal acts.

Yet, the reaction in Europe and the United States has been too often shaped by those who would promote an extreme anti-Muslim bigotry, such as the Rev. Franklin Graham who characterizes Islam as a religion of violence, and others who argue that Islam is not compatible with democracy and that the ultimate aim of Muslims is to impose Sharia law on Western society. Such lies were reinforced by Fox News giving false reports of London and Paris having "no go zones", where Muslims were enforcing Sharia law and local police dare not enter. As a Roman Catholic well aware of the history of bigotry in which Catholicism was similarly slandered as incompatible with American democracy, and a threat to the religious liberty of others, I can well sympathize with the feelings of my Muslim friends and colleagues facing the same false distortion of their religion.

The tragic irony is that the vilification of Islam in Western media and societies only serves the interests of extremists who want to convince Muslims that the West is at war with Islam. When we see angry protests in Muslim countries against the cartoon characterizations of the Prophet Mohammed, is it correct for us to simply interpret this as a sign that Islam is not compatible with democracy? Or is the more insightful interpretation that these Muslim protestors are angry because

they see Western society as belittling their religion and therefore them as people? For these protestors, the issue is not about free speech, it is about respect. It is about their perception of the belittling Western attitudes towards them rooted in the era of colonialism. Thus, in their reaction to Western statements about Mohammed and Islam and in our reaction to their anger, we are like two worlds not understanding what each is saying is important to them. So we see only the false face we give to the other.

   If we want to see the true face of Islam in America, we must look at the vast majority of our hardworking, law-abiding Muslim neighbors who treasure our democracy. We must look, as Colin Powell said, at the tombstones in Arlington National Cemetery marked with crescent moons, alongside those marked with a cross or the Star of David.

   If we want to see the true face of Islam in the world, we must not just look at the secular or theocratic dictators, many of whom are in power because of the history of Western support and policies. We must also look at the youthful protestors brutally crushed in Iran, and those who filled Tahir Square in Egypt, to bring down first Mubarak, and then Morsi, because they wanted a real democracy and not a Muslim Brotherhood replacement dictator. Rather than seeing Islam as a monolithic entity with a Taliban face, we must recognize the multifaceted reality of Islam and the traditional cultures of many Muslim countries that are struggling with the adaptation to modernity which Christianity and Judaism had to previously undergo.

   Many in the West have called for Muslim leaders to speak out more forcefully and collectively against the use of Islam to justify extremism, and indeed more such action is needed. However, it must also be recognized that when such actions have been taken, they have received virtually no recognition in Western media and society. In 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan, together with representatives of all branches and schools of jurisprudence of Islam issued, THE AMMAN MESSAGE, which rejected violence and extremism as incompatible with Islam. There could be no more authoritative statement on the issue as this was, yet it was virtually ignored by Western media and most people in Western countries have never heard of it. Similarly, in 2007, Muslim leaders and scholars addressed an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI and other world Christian leaders entitled A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU, calling for interfaith cooperation to bring peace and justice to the world. Again, it received little recognition or attention in Western countries. While indeed there must be more concerted effort by Muslim leaders to publicly stand against the misuse of Islam by extremists, there must also be a greater openness in Western society to actually hear that voice.

   Thus, it would be tragically sad if our debate on the importance of free speech focused only on the rights of those who would mock and insult, rather than on our moral obligation to maintain a civil discourse that embodies the right of every individual and community to respect, and which rejects the promotion of misinformation and bigoted stereotypes. Such a civil discourse is not only essential to the preservation of an inclusive pluralistic democracy for ourselves, it is also vital to our ability to create a global civil discourse essential to the creation of a peaceful global community.

By Rev. William A. Au, Ph.D.
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