

Déjà Vu in France: Hypocrisy of the French State.

“Freedom of Speech” versus Islamophobia

"Freedom of speech should never ever glorify the freedom to insult, to mock, to humiliate another person or community or civilisation"

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As events unfold in France centring around Islamophobia, there is a feeling of déjà vu. We have witnessed a few times before this sequence of events. There is some provocation or other targeting the Prophet Muhammad initiated by a non-Muslim group or institution. Predictably, Muslims react. In the midst of demonstrations and rallies, an act of violence occurs perpetrated by an offended Muslim and/or his co-religionists. The violent act leads to further demonization of Muslims in the media which by this time is in a frenzy. Feeling targeted, some Muslim groups escalate their emotional response, sometimes causing more deaths to occur of both Muslims and non-Muslims even in countries far away from the place where the provocation first occurred. One also hears of calls to boycott goods produced in the country where it all started.

On this occasion too it was French president Emmanuel Macron's vigorous assertion that cartoons of the Prophet produced by the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo, in January 2015 and republished since represented freedom of speech that angered a lot of Muslims in France and elsewhere, though some other remarks he had made recently about 'Islam being in crisis' and 'Islamic separatism' had also annoyed some people. However, it was the beheading of a French schoolteacher who had shown the cartoons in a class discussion on freedom of speech by a Muslim youth of Chechen origin that provoked not only Macron but also other leaders and a huge segment of French society to react with hostility towards Muslims and even Islam. It should be emphasised that almost all major Muslim leaders and organisations in France also condemned the beheading. So did many Muslims in other parts of the world.

It is not enough just to denounce an ugly, insane murder of this sort. Not many Muslim theologians have argued publicly that resorting to mindless violence to express one's anger over a caricature of the Prophet is an affront to the blessed memory of God's Messenger. For even when he was physically abused in both Mecca and Medina, Prophet Muhammad did not retaliate with violence against his adversaries. He continued with his mission of preaching justice and mercy with kindness and dignity. It is such an attitude that should be nurtured and nourished in the Muslim world today especially by those who command religious authority and political influence among the masses.

If a change in approach is necessary among some Muslims, French society as a whole should also re-appraise its understanding of freedom of speech. Freedom of speech should never ever glorify the freedom to insult, to mock, to humiliate another person or community or civilisation. Respect for the feelings and sentiments of the religious other should be

integral to one's belief system, whether it is secular or not. Just because the French State and much of French society have marginalised religion, it does not follow that it should also show utter contempt for a Muslim's love and reverence for his/her Prophet especially when 6 million French citizens profess the Islamic faith.

Indeed, respecting and understanding the sentiments and values that constitute faith and belief has become crucial in a globalised world where at least 80 % of its inhabitants are linked in one way or another to some religion or other. We cannot claim to be champions of democracy and yet ignore, or worse, denigrate what is precious to the majority of the human family. This does not mean that we should slavishly accept mass attitudes towards a particular faith. Reforms should continue to be pursued within each religious tradition but it should not undermine respect for the foundations of that faith.

French leaders and elites who regard freedom of speech or expression as the defining attribute of their national identity, should also concede that there have been a lot of inconsistencies in their stances. A French comedian, Dieudonne, has been convicted in Court eight times for allegedly upsetting "Jewish sentiment" and is prohibited from performing in many venues. A cartoonist with Charlie Hebdo was fired for alleged "anti-Semitism." There is also the case of a writer, Robert Faurisson in the sixties who was fined in Court and lost his job for questioning the conventional holocaust narrative. Many years later, the French intellectual Roger Garaudy was also convicted for attempting to re-interpret certain aspects of the holocaust.

The hypocrisy of the French State goes beyond convictions in Court. While officials are rightfully aghast at the violence committed by individuals, France has a long history of perpetrating brutal massacres and genocides against Muslims and others. The millions of Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans who died in the course of the French colonisation of these countries bear tragic testimony to this truth. Vietnam and the rest of Indo-China reinforce this cruel and callous record. Even in contemporary times, the French State has had no qualms about embarking upon military operations from Afghanistan and Cote d'Ivoire to Libya and North Mali which serve its own interests of dominance and control rather than the needs of the people in these lands.

Honest reflections upon its own misdeeds past and present are what we expect of the French state and society in 2020. There is no need to pontificate to others. This is what we would like to see all colonial powers of yesteryear do — partly because neo-colonialism is very much alive today.

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