

## Free speech and civic responsibility

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There are three things we have to bear in mind about the controversy over the cartoons published in the European media depicting the Prophet Muhammad. First, it is against Islamic principles to represent in imagery not only Muhammad, but all the prophets of Islam. This is a clear prohibition. Second, in the Muslim world, we are not used to laughing at religion, our own or anybody else's. This is far from our understanding. For that reason, these cartoons are seen, by average Muslims and not just radicals, as a transgression against something sacred, a provocation against Islam. Third, Muslims must understand that laughing at religion is a part of the broader culture in which they live in Europe, going back to Voltaire. Cynicism, irony and indeed blasphemy are part of the culture.

When you live in such an environment as a Muslim, it is really important to be able to take a critical distance and not react so emotionally. You need to hold to your Islamic principles, but be wise enough not to overreact to provocation. For Muslim majority countries to react emotionally to these cartoons with boycotts is to nurture the extremists on the other side, making it a test of wills. On one side, the extremists argue: "See, we told you, the West is against Islam." On the other side they say, "See, Muslims can't be integrated into Europe, and they are destroying our values by not accepting what we stand for." This way of opening a debate on emotional grounds is, in fact, a way of closing the door on rational discourse.

What we need now on both sides is an understanding that this is not a legal issue, or an issue of rights. Free speech is a right in Europe and legally protected. No one should contest this. At the same time, there should be an understanding that the complexion of European society has changed with immigrants from diverse cultures. Because of that, there should be sensitivity to Muslims and others living in Europe.

There are no legal limits to free speech, but there are civic limits. In any society, there is a civic understanding that free speech should be used wisely so not as to provoke sensitivities, particularly in hybrid, multicultural societies we see in the world today. It is a matter of civic responsibility and wisdom, not a question of legality or rights. In that context, I think it was unwise to publish these cartoons because it is the wrong way to start a debate about integration. Such a move inflames emotions; it does not court reason. It is a useless provocation. How does one imagine that the average Muslim in Europe who opposes terrorism will react seeing the Prophet Muhammad depicted with a bomb in his turban? Publishing these cartoons is a very stupid way to address the issue of freedom of speech. Now it is a power struggle. Who will have the final word? Who is right? Who will have the upper hand? What do we want, to polarize our world or build bridges?

Look, let's have a true debate about the future of our society. Muslims have to understand there is free speech in Europe, and that is that. On the other side, there needs to be an understanding that sensitive issues must be addressed with wisdom and prudence, not provocation. Just because you have the legal right to do something doesn't mean you have to do it. You have to understand the people around you. Do I go around insulting people just because I'm free to do it? No. It's called civic responsibility.

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