

A 'Freedom' Whose Home Is the Jungle

Ziauddin Sardar, The Independent —

"Fire!" a man yells to a packed theater audience. "What are you doing?" asks his incredulous companion. "I'm abusing free speech to prove it exists," comes the reply. The audience guffaws. Tom Stoppard's quip from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* brings the furor over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to life.

But the cartoons come alive not as philosophical whimsy but as tense battle lines. On one side, we have liberal extremists defending "freedom of expression" as a sacred and absolute territory. The right to offend is advanced as the essential liberty of a secular society. On the other side, we have bearded and masked men protesting against the outrage in the language of absolute fanaticism. Placards shouting "Bomb the West" and "Cut Their Heads Off" are vile and offensive. How freedom of expression is exercised is as important as how the outrage against an offense is demonstrated. Both are cast in the language of extremism and violence.

Let us be clear about one thing: This is not an issue of "freedom of expression." It is about power, domination and demonization. The offense is not just the representation of the Prophet Muhammad. The outrage is that the Prophet is represented as a terrorist with the clear implication that he preaches a violent creed and that all his followers are intrinsically violent. This is painting Islam and every Muslim in the conclusive colors of absolute darkness. No culture or people can accept such representation no matter how it is justified.

A cartoon is a satiric device. Satire holds a mirror to the powerful, speaking truth to power. But European Muslims can hardly be described as powerful. The Muslims of Denmark, France, Germany and Holland are among the most marginalized, unrepresented and voiceless of communities. They have no comeback. When the powerless are ridiculed in this manner, "freedom of expression" becomes an instrument of oppression.

As the editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, the Danish paper where the cartoons first appeared, admits, the exercise was undertaken simply because it could be undertaken — to show there is nothing off limits to ridicule. In other words, it was an exercise to demonstrate power, and to illustrate that European liberal secularists have a superior right to define and determine how Islam should be seen and how Muslims observe their faith. The choice of so many newspapers across Europe to republish the cartoons is definitively a gauntlet directed at all Muslims. It is a practical demonstration of President Bush's diktat that you are either with us or against us — accept what we do and join civilization; object and be categorized as barbarians.

We have been here before. This is the same choice Europe gave to the Jews in 1920s and 30s. The parallels are uncanny. The Muslims are now being projected as the alien "others" with foreign values within Europe. They are being demonized with exactly the same vehemence. The blood rite has been replaced with notions of Muslim violence, backwardness, and fanaticism.

Right-wing extremism and fascism are on the increase. "Freedom of expression" has now become a precursor to the banality of evil. In other words, Muslims are being set up for the next holocaust.

It is time for mindless defenders of "freedom of expression" to realize that the kind of absolute freedom they seek belongs only in the jungle. In a civilized society, freedom always comes with responsibility. In

many European countries, free speech does not extend to the denial of the Holocaust. Indeed, anyone denying even the methods by which Jews were put to death by the Nazis can end up in jail. We are not free to glorify child pornography. We are not even free to drive on the road the way we want to drive.

Moreover, the argument that the absolute and sacred territory of liberal secularism are superior to the sacred notions of other cultures is Eurocentric and arrogant. Such hubris, as the Danes have demonstrated so well, is a recipe for conflict and violence. It fuels extremism on both sides. Freedom of expression is not about doing whatever we want to do because we can do it. It is about creating an open marketplace for ideas and debate where all, including the marginalized, can take part as equals.

During the Rushdie affair, the question all Muslims faced was “have you read the book?” So far, everyone in Britain is arranging their angst and anguish over cartoons no newspaper has printed. Is Britain going soft? Are we once bitten, once bombed, and fighting shy? Or have we arrived at a different construction of the basic issues involved? Tom Stoppard’s jest is based on the aphorism of an American jurist that asserts there are limits to free expression. In Britain we are learning the lesson that these limits are to be found in the social consequences, the potential harm to others of an exercise of free speech. Tolerance is easy if there is nothing to offend. We become tolerant only when we defer to the sensitivities of those with whom we profoundly disagree on matters we do not believe can or should be accepted. Forbearance is the currency of peaceful coexistence in heterodox society.

It would indeed be brave of me to suggest that Britain has arrived at a clear and settled forbearance. Especially in the week a British jury gave Nick Griffin of the BNP a get out of jail card. Griffin’s free expression, he claimed, was speaking for millions, the verdict a blow for liberty. Am I the only one who can hear in his words the echoes of Germany in the 1930s? Are the Danish cartoons not merely Griffin’s words in graphic form? It is not just Muslims who can see that liberty, due process before the law, stop-and-search powers, and a climate of suspicion verging on guilt by association are live issues in Britain today. Anti-terror legislation, the shoot-to-kill policy, possible connivance with extraordinary rendition — these are assaults on the basic liberties of all Britons that most directly affect British Muslims.

But British Muslims are not questioning anyone’s right to argue about religion, or indeed to ridicule religion. But know who or what you are putting in a pillory. Prejudice is not a basis for defending liberty.

Ridiculing those whose liberties are most under threat is only adding fuel to wildfires our politics at home and abroad have unleashed. We all need to learn how to become firefighters, not arsonists.