

Reflections on Hatred and the Defamation of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) ¹

When it comes to the relations between “the West” and the “Muslim world,” there is no question that we are currently living in an environment of heightened fear, hatred, anxiety, violence and extremism. We are living in a time in which the prudent and wise person will think about what he will say or do. It is obviously not a time in which we avoid speaking the truth and working for justice—as that is always a given. However, it is a time for reasonable people to avoid anything that can be used in a negative way to further destabilize the situation and cause senseless harm.

In particular since 9/11, one often hears the following question being posed by the people of the West, “Why do they hate us?” It is interesting to observe what behavior is occurring at the same time that they are asking this question—and, in fact, what behavior has been occurring for centuries, as shall be noted later. At the same time that they are, it must be presumed, sincerely asking the question, “Why do they hate us?” many of their societal leaders and many in their media continue to disrespect and ridicule Islam, Muslims and even the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)—doing acts that seem to be intended only to hurt the feelings of the Muslims. Most recently, one can point to the cartoons in Denmark that depicted, for example, the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) having a bomb in his turban.² These classless and offensive cartoons were later republished in other newspapers throughout Europe, demonstrating support for the original publishers.³ Even before these events, one can find Christian leaders and social commentators in the United States making antagonistic and hate-provoking statements about Islam or the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), calling him a terrorist or even a child molester. The situation has not been much better in Europe, although they have much larger Muslim minorities.

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² It should be noted that the Muslim outrage concerning these cartoons is not related simply to the fact that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is depicted in these cartoons. Although Muslims would not draw pictures of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), the essential problem with these cartoons is the defamation and ridicule of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). This point is explicitly made here because some news reports have presented the issue as if it were simply a matter of depicting the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

³ We commend those Western media outlets that refused to show these cartoons, deeming them too insulting.

In this environment, beyond asking “Why do they hate us?” perhaps another important question needs to be asked by all: Is our own behavior leading us in a positive or beneficial direction? Maybe the answer to this question may shed some light on the answer to the aforementioned question.

The Legal Framework

Those who engage in the practice of defaming Islam or the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) have claimed that they are simply exercising their rights of freedom of speech, opinion and belief. Within the Western framework, they may have an argument. At the end of January 2006, the Blair government was defeated in attempting to pass a law that would have made ridiculing faiths and religious leaders a type of hate crime. In an interview with BBC on February 1, 2006, a Member of Parliament who opposed the bill said that the law must protect life and property but need not protect “feelings.” Thus, as long as a person’s “life or property” is not physically attacked, one should be free to express what one wishes. This approach reflects the currently accepted Western emphasis on individual rights as opposed to social welfare. Indeed, in the aftermath of the dispute concerning the cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), some in Europe are proudly—actually, arrogantly—proclaiming that they have the right to insult God if they want to.

Whatever the man-made legal rights may be and ignoring the gravity of the manner in which such insults have been done, what if such statements do eventually lead to harm and attacks on life and property? What is the logic behind permitting “causes” that lead to “harm” while prohibiting the act of harm in itself? For example, is there anything reprehensible about drunk driving in itself or is it prohibited by law only due to the harm that it can result in, the loss of life and property?

In any case, of course, simply because something is legal by law does not necessarily imply that it is moral or even wise. In the current environment, this is the more important issue. One should never invoke one’s “rights” in defense of harmful and hateful actions that could eventually even lead to bloodshed. Thus, it is not a matter of passing new laws, as was attempted in England. Instead, it is a matter of recognizing the morally correct path to follow and the prudent path to follow.

The Dangers of Defamation and Ridicule in the Media

No one can doubt that images and stereotypes presented in the media are very powerful. In many cases, they form a person’s perception of reality. In particular, many

of the West, more so in the US than in Europe, do not have first hand experiences with Muslims and therefore they must rely on the media to develop their perception of Islam and Muslims. Nacos and Torres-Reyna write, “Some 55 years ago, before the advent of television, Walter Lippmann observed that what people know about the world around them is mostly the result of second-hand knowledge received through the press and that the ‘pictures in our heads’ are the result of a pseudo-reality reflected in the news.”⁴

Thus, the press bears a great responsibility. What and how the press presents something can ultimately lead to decisions of life and death or war and peace. Indeed, political cartoons and yellow journalism can be sufficient to drive a country into a war frenzy—as they appeal to the emotions of the masses. Anyone familiar with the Spanish-American War is well aware of this fact. There were powerful forces in the United States who were determined to go to war against Spain, fearing the “Spanish threat” on the Americas. The New York Morning Journal (headed by William Randolph Hearst) and The New York World used yellow journalism to depict Spanish oppression in Cuba. Even though President McKinley wanted to follow a hands-off policy, the effect of the media was such that it led to great popular support to come to the aid of the Cubans. This put great pressure upon President McKinley, leading him to send the Battleship Maine to Havana in 1898. The Battleship Maine exploded. The Navy at that time was unable to determine the cause of the explosion—although more recently many have concluded that it was due to mechanical problems. At that time, the Spanish offered to turn the issue of responsibility over to an arbitrator. However, even without being able to identify the exact cause of the explosion, the media pounced on the opportunity, spread the slogan “Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain” and continued to depict the evil Spaniards in their cartoons. The United States was now definitely going to war. The lessons of those events should not be lost on the world today.

Another example of the influence of the press is discussed in the following passage: “The racism that led to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II was created partly by the motion picture industry, which for years typecast Orientals as villains, and partly by the press, especially the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst.”⁵ Today, of course, the internment of the Japanese is something that we Americans remember with shame.

The result—if not the goal—of blatant defamation and ridicule is the dehumanization of the enemy. When the enemy is dehumanized, one no longer cares how much they

⁴ Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, “Framing Muslim-Americans Before and After 9/11,” in Pippa Norris, Montague Kern and Marion Just, eds. *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 135.

⁵ Nacos and Torres-Reyna, p. 152.

suffer. One can then do things to them that humans would, under normal circumstances, completely shun—such as all forms of horrendous torture and humiliation.

Who Would Want to Participate in or Support Such Defamation and Hate-Filled Actions?

Inexcusable defamation is occurring. Before discussing who may be pleased with such occurrences, I would like to first discuss who should not be participating in such activities.

First, it seems to me—and only God knows—that those who want to display the Christian witness to humanity certainly should shun and oppose any such behavior. It is the Christian who usually claims that Muslims do not understand that “God is love” and that one should love one’s enemy. Thus, they should be at the forefront of putting an end to such harmful statements and defamation of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). These shameful acts certainly do not demonstrate grace and love.

Second, those who are truly interested in peace must also take a stand. You cannot simultaneously allow and support hate-provoking messages and ridicule while at the same time claiming to be working for true peace among the different peoples. True peace cannot come without some form of mutual respect and understanding. Certainly immaturely attacking the icons or beliefs that are dear to millions living on the planet could not be seen as a means of respect and understanding.

Third, those who are interested in human rights and human dignity should also be outraged at what is done in the name of freedom and human rights. If the concept of human rights is going to mean anything it should at least mean respect for humans! To unjustifiably ridicule, attack or defame others should be considered a violation of one’s right to a decent life without unwarranted aggression and attack. When will the paradox of humans being dehumanized and humiliated in the name of human freedoms and human rights ever be solved? Indeed, when will secular humans finally realize that such is a paradox for which they may never have a solution?

Muslims also should never engage in false or ridiculing propaganda against others. Even if there is great hatred between the Muslim and others, a Muslim is never allowed to deviate from what is truthful and proper. This is because the ultimate goal of a Muslim is the pleasure of God and God is pleased with truth and justice. The mere ridicule of others resulting only in increased hatred—not to speak of hatred between individuals but, indeed, even a hatred for God’s religion—is not part of the character of

a Muslim. The following verses of the Quran should make all Muslims alert to these points:

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses for Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a Better Protector to both (than you). So follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you may avoid justice...” (al-Nisaa 135);

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah and be just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety, and fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Well-Acquainted with what you do” (al-Maaidah 8);

“And do not insult those [objects of worship] whom they worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge. Thus We have made fair-seeming to each people its own doings; then to their Lord is their return and He shall then inform them of all that they used to do” (al-Anaam 108).

The question then remains: Who is it that could possibly be pleased with and support such rude and ill-mannered behavior as the defaming of the spiritual leader of almost one-fifth of the planet? Unfortunately, there are a few categories of people who are actively pushing and promoting a phenomenon described as “Islamophobia,”⁶ putting the fear of Islam and Muslims in the hearts of non-Muslims. It is hoped that no rational, sincere person would want to be from these different groups of people who foster such hate and, eventually, violence.

First and most obvious are people who are simply racists. These people have a hatred for all “others” and see them as inferior, untermenschen. They want their own people to also hate the “other” and therefore they are happy to spread any slurs or insults. The whole basis of racist thought is that someone is superior not due to anything that he has actually done but only due to something given to him by God and over which the individual himself had no control or choice. It seems that this would appeal most to persons who have no individual redeeming qualities of their own! Be that as it may, it is amazing how prevalent racism and racist feelings are in the West. It is the people of the

⁶ A number of publications cover the manifestations and extent of Islamophobia in recent years. The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) published a paper entitled, “Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001.” Another important work was published by The Runnymede Trust entitled, “Islamophobia: A Challenge for us All.” The Runnymede Trust earlier produced a Consultation Paper in which they stated, “Islamophobia is dread or hatred of Islam and of Muslims. It has existed in western countries and cultures for several centuries but in the last twenty years has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous. It is an ingredient of all sections of the media, and is prevalent in all sections of society.”

West, in general, who are saying that they want the Muslims to become modernized, claiming that Islam and Muslims are barbarians, backwards, uncivilized and unmodernized. Is it any wonder that their message has been unappealing to so many Muslims?

Unfortunately, there are also many strong political factors behind the current demonizing of Muslims. There is a political-philosophical belief that one's country needs a well-defined and dangerous enemy. Especially since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, that enemy has more and more been identified as Muslims and Islam (sometimes referred to in more politically correct terms as "fundamentalist Islam"). One can return to the example of the Soviet Union to see how an enemy can be created and made as giant as can be. During the 1950s, the children of the United States were repeatedly going through drills in case the Soviets should attack the US with nuclear weapons. Looking back, the reality seemed to be very different. Former US statesman George Kennan, who had originally proposed the policy of Russian containment, admitted that he knew that Russia did not want to go to war. He stated, "The image of a Stalinist Russia poised and yearning to attack the West, and deterred only by [US] possession of atomic weapons, was largely a creation of Western imagination."⁷ A report in the Guardian also states that British military and intelligence chiefs believed that, "The Soviet Union will not deliberately start general war or even limited war in Europe," so said a classified paper marked "Top Secret, UK Eyes Only."⁸ One of the leading proponents of the concept of the clash of civilizations, Samuel Huntington, is himself one of the believers in this outlook. Among the many things he stated pointing to this view of the world is, "We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against."⁹

Finally, those Muslims who might hold some extreme views in regards to to the West are also very happy with such practices that demonstrate the West's lack of respect toward Muslims. In turn, they use this as an argument that the people of the West, therefore, are not deserving of respect. They want no limits to the manner in which they fight—and it is only a small step from quoting non-Muslim disrespect for Muslims to convincing a person that civilian non-Muslims, therefore, are also not deserving of respect. Hence, those people who defend acts of defamation and ridicule in the name of "rights and freedoms" are simply playing right into their hands.

⁷ Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *Behind the War on Terror: Western Secret Strategy and the Struggle for Iraq* (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2003), pp. 8-9.

⁸ Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, pp. 9-10.

⁹ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 21.

These are the main categories of people who would be pleased with such acts of defamation and ridicule of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), of Muslims or of the “other” in general. As stated earlier, it is hoped that rational and sincere people would not wish to be counted among such groups of people.

However, there is another important point that needs to be made. This has to do with those who defend such hate-producing acts, again probably in the name of free speech, liberty and so forth. What, though, is the difference between defending acts like this—that lead to more hatred and therefore more violence—and directly supporting known terrorists? Yes, one can argue that there is a difference. But to the person who truly wants to take responsibility for the ramifications of his actions (what he does as well as what he advocates), he should consider what occurs when he supports or sees nothing wrong with denigrating and defaming others in such a manner that will only produce more hatred. There is no question that this hatred may easily lead to more violence, bloodshed, turmoil and suffering. Certainly, he cannot truly believe that his hands are absolutely free of any guilt.

Defamation versus Critique

Most of the inhabitants of the West are non-Muslims. Many of them are not Muslim because they feel that there is something unacceptable in Islam. Hence, it is to be expected that they would have thoughts about the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that Muslims would not share. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) himself debated with Jews, Christians and polytheists who did not believe in him and even after discussions with the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) himself they remained true to their own faiths. Thus, no one, Muslim or otherwise, should be surprised if a non-Muslim has a lesser opinion of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) than a Muslim has.

The Quran welcomes discussion and dialogue with the non-Muslims:

“Invite (mankind, O Muhammad) to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and debate with them in a way that is better. Truly, your Lord knows best who has gone astray from His Path, and He is the Best Aware of those who are guided” (al-Nahl 125).

In fact, more than once, the Quran even asks the non-Muslim to,

“Produce your proof if you are truthful” (al-Baqarah 111; al-Naml 64; al-Qasas 75).

Thus, the objection is not to non-Muslims—especially in their own lands—expressing their view about the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). If what they state is sincere and rational, then they can be spoken to on a rational level with sincerity. Indeed, Muslims welcome such discussions and, in reality, such discussions are best for Islam, because, to this day, most of the people in the West have distorted views of Islam. If they wish to express their views honestly and discuss them honestly, they can be presented with the truth of Islam. This act in itself may reduce the tension and discord that exists between non-Muslims and Muslims. In fact, after the events of 9/11, many Americans took the effort to find out more about Islam and there was much more exposure of Islam and Muslims. Thus, in comparing surveys before 9/11 and after 9/11, Nacos and Torres-Reyna found that “the American public in general viewed Muslim-Americans more favorable after September 11, 2001.”¹⁰

One can respond to rational arguments with an honest and straightforward rational discussion. However, there is no real response to something that is meant only to ridicule, insult or harm.

In sum, if non-Muslims want to debate and discuss the real issues of religion and belief, Muslims are more than ready to do that. If they resort to defamation and ridicule, then they should not be surprised if they are in turn responded to with hatred and disrespect. There is no need for them to then ask, “Why do they hate us?” The answer should be clear.

Actually, there is one author who makes the point that those in the past who attacked the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) did so in an attempt to avoid discussing the real issues. Minou Reeves writes in a work entitled *Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth-Making*,

The trouble started with early medieval Christian polemicists. They chose not to attack Islamic theology, which was too seductive in its simplicity and clarity, and which raised too many awkward questions about Christian dogma. Nor could they cast doubt on the pious practice of ordinary Muslims. Instead, anticipating the worst excesses of tabloid journalism, they personalized the issue and attacked the Prophet of Islam, dispensing with all but the barest knowledge of any facts and inventing falsehoods. Muslims could not reply in kind, since they are told by the Qur’an to revere Jesus as a holy prophet.¹¹

It seems that not much has truly changed over the centuries.

¹⁰ Nacos and Torres-Reyna, p. 152.

¹¹ Minou Reeves, *Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth-Making* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. x.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I think all in the world can agree that mutual understanding, mutual respect, peace and justice certainly will never result from defamation, ridicule and insult. Therefore, there is no real benefit from defaming or denigrating the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in a manner like the recent political cartoons in Europe. The only result that one can expect from such practices is more hatred, violence and fear. Certainly, if you disrespect someone else, you cannot expect that he will show great respect for you in return. If this hatred does turn into more terrorism, the longer term result may simply be more restrictions on civil liberties and freedoms in the West. Those who are supporting such cartoons in the name of rights and liberties may, in the long-run, find their liberties restricted because of what these disrespectful acts produced. In essence, nobody wins in the long-run. There is simply no rationale for such behavior.

At the same time, we have to call upon all interested parties to show restraint and to consider what ramifications anything that they say or do might have. Muslim scholars should take the lead, as they have done in the past, to stress to the Muslims that the actions of the non-Muslims should never anger them so much that it leads them to do something that contradicts the Law of Islam. It is time for leaders in the West to realize that the “freedom” which is very dear to the Western conscience should not be an unwise or harmful freedom. I believe it was Milton Friedman who stated, “My freedom to swing my fist stops where your chin begins.” In today’s turbulent environment, perhaps it should be said—not as a law but as moral behavior—“My freedom of speech ends where your personal dignity begins.”