

Freedom of Speech

The rights enshrined by a society speak volumes about its values. Freedom of speech speaks to the value of open and dispassionate debate, a search for truth, and implies a desire for change and evolution. Its intrinsic merit is unquestionable, with “the right to freedom of opinion and expression” upheld in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But when BBC News lauded those taking to the streets “to defend the right to be irreverent, to offend, to mock” (7 January 2015), it begged the question – are there limits?

In fact, virtually all countries, including the United States and France, place limitations on freedom of speech. Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms reserves the right to limit freedom of speech based on what is reasonable and justifiable. Most governments have laws prohibiting unacceptable behaviour such as hate speech, obscenity, defamation, incitement to war, etc.

The parameters placed on freedom of speech are determined by each sovereign state according to its values. For example, variations on the concept of “lèse majesté”, in France and several other countries, prohibit insults to the state, the head of state, the flag, even the national anthem. French publishers have been heavily fined for seemingly minor misdemeanors such as articles defying the state’s stand on illegal drugs.

In the case of the UK, exceptions to freedom of the press include “insulting words or behaviour intending or likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress or cause a breach of the peace”. Many countries, such as Finland, Ireland, Italy and most Islamic countries, prohibit blasphemy for similar reasons.

If our goal is to build a better world, the ability to express our opinions without censure is no more immune to the setting of parameters than any other right.

One of our more urgent challenges right now is learning how to react to repeatedly occurring terrorist threats in a way that will heal rifts and build just, welcoming and peaceful societies.

As reprehensible and unjustifiable as terrorist actions may be, attributing the motivation solely to a hatred of freedom is a counter-productive oversimplification. Instead of delving into more complex causes, we intimate that no understandable source of anger exists. This particular spin feeds fear, confusion and anti-religious sentiment.

Martin Luther King Jr. wisely commented, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” As a Bahá’í, I see our modern age as marking “the coming of age of the entire human race”, which brings with it the need for a level of maturity and of organization that has never before existed on a planetary scale.

Building a culture of peace and cooperation requires an adherence to moral values that goes beyond rhetoric. It is an active process requiring justice, the honesty to examine our own cultural biases, and an avoidance of “us and them” thinking.

A sense of the sacred and a respect for all life are ideals that can and should rank among the highest in visioning this world several generations down the line from our turbulent times. These are inclusive values shared by all religions as well as a large proportion of the secular population.

As individuals we know intuitively that all members of the family must be included and given due respect. We consciously cultivate and maintain our relationships. As peoples and nations it's high time that we master that art.

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