

The Freedom of Expression and Speech in Islam

The issue that is jointly highlighted by both Western and Islamic discourses on human rights is that of human inherent dignity and honor. It does indeed deserve such an attention, but I think the 19th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in fact contradicts human inherent dignity and honor. It reads:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Thus, if someone or a group uses this article as a resort to ruin the reputation and honor of a group or a society in the mass media, what kind of action should subsequently be taken against that person or group? Do human rights allow people's reputations to be ruined in the name of freedom of opinion and expression?!

I think a condition must be added to the 19th article to the effect that everyone should have the right to freedom of opinion and expression provided that they do not ruin other people's reputation, honor and dignity.

An idea or a theory may once be critically assessed based on scientific methods and scientific outlook. However, sometimes criticisms are directed toward the character and reputation of a writer or theoretician. Where should this innocent individual lodge his complaint then? Does this innocent victim of unconditional right of freedom of expression have the right to lodge a complaint at all? Scientific debates have their own logic. Nobody would be offended by the critiques that are made of his ideas or theories. Of course, we know that scientific criticism has its own etiquettes that must be observed so that nobody feels insulted.

We need to see if human thought has reached that degree of maturity that would enable man to distinguish between good and evil, beautiful and ugly or white and black, so that we may confer upon man an unconditional right of freedom of opinion. Is the human condition indeed so? Are all Easterners Avicenna, Averroes, Suhrawardi, MirDamad and Mullah Sadra, and are all Westerners Descartes, Kant and Hegel so that one could say whatever one wants to? In other words, have these people reached the point of maturity at which they can easily recognize the truth from the wrong?

We know that such a degree of maturity has not yet been reached; rather, human understanding has unfortunately been so dulled by the last machine-plagued century that if you ask an average man "Whence have you come?" he will only stare at you! That is, man can not even understand your question. Accordingly, we are currently living in an era of the occultation of all ideologies, worldviews and universal outlooks.

The freedom of thought and expression has so vastly expanded that everyone allows themselves to say whatever they want. No doubt, truths are tightly enfolded in wrongs. This is why we see today that not only are youth caught with nihilistic ideas, but the students of human sciences and philosophy are far fewer in number than other disciplines as there are few people who take thinking serious. The whole world is now fraught with various means of

narcotization, as people want to dull their senses. If we shut our eyes to these sore realities today, history shall expose us in future to our deplorable past.

The freedom of thought and expression is necessary, but we should first prepare the required conditions and enhance the knowledge of societies; when human thought has not been advanced enough, human beings will hastily pose any theory coming to their minds and then find themselves surrounded by paradoxes. As a result, under the shower of paradoxes, man will be forced to deny everything. "I should only eat and drink," he will think, "as my death is coming." This is the logic of contemporary world.

As I have frequently indicated in my dialogues and lectures, excessive indulgences have been done as to freedom of expression and thought. Of course, speaking of such issues is pleasurable, like the irrational pleasure of a candle's light in daylight. However, the source of that fake light is limited, and when night comes, man will have to remain in darkness. Sa'di, may he rest in divine peace, has said:

The poor-minded person who sits by a candle in daylight

Very soon you shall see him sitting in the darkness at night.

It is indeed pleasant to chatter on such issues, and one would admit that these issues are good means to deceive simple minds. Nevertheless, when a scholar treads on his scientific and human conscience, not only will his words turn out to be of no avail, but they will also prove to be harmful as well.

I am always filled with wonder when I read the following remark that has been attributed to Voltaire:

I am ready to sacrifice my life for your freedom of expression although I would be against your opinions.

This axiom, when not practiced in its true spirit, represents an uncommitted view on freedom that may result in the outburst of passionate volcanoes of human carnal desires which would subsequently exterminate human life on the earth!! Voltaire was wise enough to create room for his world-view through the above-mentioned statement, but could not create an open space for others.

Thus conceived, the freedom of expression that is used against the social and spiritual interests of humanity is "unintelligible freedom," that is similar to "the sword at the hand of a drunken man"; otherwise, intelligible freedom is surely protected by the rule of natural law. To put the matter in clear terms, unintelligible freedom is a freedom that helps the ego and its baser self to extinguish its carnal lust to any limits. It is ironical that we can spend millions on experiments on different animals to test the effectiveness of a medicine for headache, and then creating havoc for animal rights in the media, but how much time and energy are we really going to expend for the cause of humanity – for intelligible freedom – as the hallmark of human existence? While medical experiments would have few animal fatalities, any negligence in terms of the ultra-significant issues of humanities could result in the annihilation of the whole mankind.

The expression of realities useful for humanity both in material and spiritual domains not only is free, but in fact anyone who knows a reality and has the ability to express it, and yet deprives people from this reality, deserves to be convicted and shall be reproved both in this world and

hereafter. The following verses of the Holy Quran eloquently depict this truth:

O followers of the book! Why do you confound the truth with the falsehood and hide the truth while you know?

(The House of Imran 3: 71)

Surely those who conceal the clear proofs and the guidance that we revealed after we made it clear in the book for men, these it is whom Allah shall curse, and those who curse shall curse them (too).

(The Cow 2:159)

Although the addressees of the first verse are the followers of book, the second one is nonetheless more general in its approach; it holds "clear proofs" and "guidance" as the foundations for the true form of life (i.e., intelligible life). This injunction is applicable to all kinds of concealment and concealers of truth, hiding clear proofs and obstructing guidance.

There are numerous narrations from the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and his progeny on the necessity of expression of practical truths. Here we shall suffice to some examples of them:

- 1- Imam Al-Sadegh (PBUH) has stated, "I read in the book of Imam Ali (PBUH) that before making the ignorant promise to seek knowledge, God charged the men of knowledge with the duty of the munificence of wisdom and knowledge, since knowledge existed before the ignorance." ¹
- 2- Imam Al-Sadegh (PBUH) was quoted as saying, "Jesus addressed the Israelites by saying, 'O' Israelites! Don't share wisdom with the ignorant, as it would be an injustice to knowledge and wisdom. And do not conceal knowledge from the men of wisdom, as it would be an injustice to these people.'" ²
- 3- Anyone who teaches a good shall be awarded like the one who has carried out that good deed. ³
- 4- Verily, the knower who hides his knowledge shall be resurrected in the Day of Judgment in a state in which no one could bear his putrid smell. ⁴
- 5- All people are members of Allah's family, and their most blessed one with the Lord, is the one who is most beneficial for the members of Allah's family. ⁵

The following results could be deduced from the above-mentioned quotations:

- I) The expression of realities and truths is an obligatory practice for those who know them, since God has obliged the possessors of knowledge to disseminate their knowledge.
- II) These quotations are equally applied to every kind of knowledge without any exception. According to reason and the two previously cited verses of the Holy Quran, this knowledge should be both materially and spiritually useful for humanity.
- III) God has made the men of knowledge promise to disseminate their knowledge and teach the ignorant who are in sacred covenant with Him and also to seek ever increase in knowledge.

1- Kolayni, Muhammad ibn Ya'qub, *Usul Al-Kafi*, Vol. 1.

2- Ibid.

3- Ibid.

4- Sheikh Al-Horre Al-Ameli, *Was'ael Al-Shi'ah*, Vol 6.

5- Ibid.

IV) Knowledge and wisdom should not be shared with those who express estrangement with it or who are declared the enemies of wisdom, since they do not know its value and would stand against it; as Imam Ali (PBUH) has eloquently stated:

*People are the enemies of what they do not know.*¹

V) Wisdom should not be concealed from the people of knowledge, since this is an unforgivable injustice to enlightened souls. The reason for this injustice lies in the fact that these concealed truths could easily lead people to or at least bring them nearer to wisdom.

VI) Everyone who teaches something to people that is gainful for them shall be benefitted from the advantages of it. The teaching material here includes everything that is of avail for the people.

VII) Those who know some useful truths and hide them from the public shall be punished on the Day of Judgment.

VIII) Social profitability is the criterion for existential excellence, i.e. those who are more beneficial for their society and fellow human beings are of more value for God.

Thus, freedom of expression in Islam is the necessary prerequisite of knowledge dissemination which is of vital significance for social life. In addition, those who deprive the public from necessary information should be treated like social agitators.²

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1- *Nahjulbalaghah*, Aphorisms 172.

2- Ja'fari, M. T. (2014): *Human Universal Rights: A Comparative Research in Islam and the West*. This book has also been translated into English by Allameh Jafari's Institute.