**Confronting Islamophobia with dialogue**

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November 6, 2020

On his way home from work on a Friday afternoon in a quiet suburban town north-west of Paris an attacker, later identified as an 18-year-old of Chechen origin, who came to France as a refugee, cornered Samuel Paty, a middle-school history and civics teacher on the street, and stabbed him repeatedly. Witnesses say the killer shouted, “AllahuAkhbar.” “I have executed one of the dogs from hell who dared to put Muhammad down,” he wrote in a message briefly posted on Twitter, with a photo showing Paty’s severed head. Within minutes, the police tracked down the killer and shot him dead.

Felt deeply by Muslims for whom any depicting of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), nothing to say about making fun of him, is a sacrilege hurting their feelings it is being assiduously fanned by radical clerics. The real mystery is how come a middle-school history and civics teacher, supposedly a learned man in a ‘civilized’ and ‘enlightened’ country like France who over the years has known and taught Muslim students,could not comprehend that making fun of Islam and its revered personalities will create trouble. With a university education specializing in history, one can only dread what must have been the content of that education. How come the educated and civilized Europeans who have been allowing and even pushing denigration of Islam and the Prophet (PBUH) for decades cannot learn their lessons? Starting from 1988 when Salman Rushdie published his ‘Satanic Verses’ it is known that these sensibilities exist. And that in a country where freedom of religion is a basic principle of government?

The problem that has existed not only for the last thirty years but much longer is that maligning of Islam and Islamic personalities is legitimated by the “freedom of speech or expression”. Any idiot has the constitutional right to say aloud and propagate whatever comes to his or her stupid mind. In Europe one can make fun about Christ and Mary and God because in a secular society their existence is doubted at best and denied at most so making fun doesn’t hurt. The statement by the Finnish Foreign MinisterPekkaHaavistois very revealing, “I don’t understand anything anymore: when we make fun of black people we call it racism; and when we mock Jews we call it anti-Semitism; and when we mock women we call it sexism; and when we mock Muslims we call it freedom of speech”

Meaning the fear of Islam Islamophobia is an age-old disease in Europe and the West. Europe had traumatic experiences with Islam and Muslims starting from the Crusades and all through till Muslim rule in Spain knocked at the doors of France in the 8th century and later when Ottoman rule threatened European countries in the 14th to the 16th century. To stem the Muslim tide influential church reformers like the German Martin Luther took up the arguments of the crusaders saying that Muslims were uncivilized savages and that Islam was teaching them to kill, brutalize women declaring them to be God’s punishment for not properly following the Christian dogma. He created the fear of Islam among Christians so that they would remain under church influence.

Globalization -one form of which is colonialism – has swept millions of Muslims into Europe and the US in search of jobs and refuge. Europe and the West was unprepared for it then and is unprepared to deal with the problem of Islam and Muslims today. France is only one example. Given the fact that violence does not solve problems but only creates more violence means that we have to find another way. That way can only be peaceful. Pakistan’sParliament has passed a resolution to boycott French goods. Boycotting French goods is not a good idea, boycotts and sanctions have never worked. What happened to the Danish boycott a couple of years ago? Danish butter and cheese are in the market and find their buyers. And after all, what French good do we use? May be our Armed Forces could avoid buying sophisticated weapons and submarines, what good will this do for the common Muslim?

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Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday wrote a letter to the leaders of the Muslim states, asking them to make collective efforts to confront the growing trend of Islamophobia. That might help but only in the long run. Muslim solidarity has its difficulties. What everyone of us can do is study the history of Islamophobia and be ready to bring forward sensible arguments against it. We have to reason with them on their own turf, confronting them with their own weaknesses and misunderstandings. Compromises can only happen through dialogue. Only with reason and logic, facts will overcome fiction.

Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ is the thesis that people’s cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world and that wars would be fought not between countries, but between cultures in the post-cold-war era. With this idea he closely follows the German historian Oswald Spengler’s theory that rejects the Eurocentric view of history, especially the division of history into the linear “ancient-medieval-modern” rubrics that suggest that all humanity would have to pass along the same path prescribed by the West sooner or later. According to Spengler, the Western world is ending and we are witnessing the last season. Spengler asserts that a characteristic of this last phase of downfall is that democracy is simply the political weapon of money, and the media are the means through which money operates a democratic political system.Huntington himself voiced that he was not advocating the desirability of conflicts between civilizations. He forgot, though, to add that his scenario should be used to balance out and avoid such a development.

One of the reservationseven among Muslims against the creation of Pakistan was that while the Muslim majority Provinces would get their independence from Hindu rule, many more Muslims than in the constituent units making Pakistan would remain in India. In a sense their continued safety and comforthas stayed our hand in dealing with Hindu extremism in the language they understand – and have understood for over a 1000 years. The way the Hindu radical BJP extremists are dealing with Muslimsin India (who make up 16% of the population) is really testing our patience. It also underscoreswhy the creation of Pakistan was being insisted upon by the Quaid as a must. In the same manner we have to be sensitive to the fact that there are many millions of Muslimsliving in Europe and USA. Do we want to condemn them to isolation and ostracism by shunning dialogue and indulging in confrontation that could lead to further violence?

What happened in France was wrong, the beheading was brutal and despicable, in the circumstances the reaction of the French President was emotional but it was also wrong.However we must engage France (and the French President) in dialogue,not get engaged in overlapping emotions that could lead to more violence. Over the years France has been a good friend, not adheringto draconian armssanctions against us when they could easily have done so and were under constant pressure to do so. While we must strongly condemn any blasphemy, particularly targeting our beloved Prophet (PBUH), we must immediately engage in dialogue to avoid confrontation. The politics of dialogue and not the politics of boycott is the answer.

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