Freedom of Speech and the West's Double Standard

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I was deeply offended by the events described in an article in the Sep. 25, 1995 issue of "Qadhaya Dowaliyah" ("International Affairs" an Arabic weekly issued in Pakistan).
It describes the furious reaction of many German intellectuals to the announcement of the Frankfurt based German Book Publishers Association that the prestigious Book Peace Award for the year 1995 would be awarded to Professor Annemarie Schimmel. Dr. Schimmel is an eminent Orientalist whose academic and literary achievements are extraordinary. She was born in Germany in April 1922.
She started to learn Arabic and Persian when she was 15 years old. She got her PhD from the University of Berlin at the age of 20 and became a full professor at the age of 25. Dr. Schimmel taught in German, Turkish, and Indian universities as well as in Harvard. She is a world authority on Islamic Mysticism and her book, The Mystical Dimensions of Islam, is one of the most authoritative references on the subject.
She has a good command of 12 languages and has translated many Oriental poems into German. She is the author of more than one hundred books, essays, and articles written in different languages. She was a member of the official delegation that accompanied the German President in his latest visit to Pakistan and Central Asia. After more than 50 years of scholarly achievements, Dr. Schimmel has been chosen to receive the German Book Peace Award for 1995 which she is due to receive on Oct. 15. As soon as it became known that Dr. Schimmel would be the recipient of this important award, many German intellectuals expressed their indignation at the decision. Hundreds of writers, academics, publishers, and book store owners signed a petition urging the German Book Publishers Association not to grant Dr. Schimmel the award. Moreover, some members of the German Parliament strongly protested giving the award to her as a "farce." The German President, who is scheduled to deliver the award to Dr. Schimmel, was put under intense pressure to dissuade him from handing the award to her.
"Why are so many people angry at this lady despite her brilliant academic achievements?", I asked myself. Is she a Nazi war criminal? Is she a neo-Nazi? Is she a racist ? Is she a child molester or a drug addict? What crime on Earth could this professor have committed to cause such a wave of indignation in a country like Germany ? I could not find any answer that make sense. The article provided the answer which has deeply hurt me. Dr. Schimmel's crime was

that she described Salman Rushdie's book, The Satanic Verses, as an insult to the feelings of millions of Muslims.

That is all. Her grievous and intolerable mistake was defending the right of hundreds of millions of Muslims to express their anger at the words that Salman Rushdie had written in his book. The German intellectuals wrote in their petitions against Dr. Schimmel that she provided moral support to Muslim fundamentalists with her criticism of Rushdie. Moreover, granting an award to her is "a slap on the face" of those who are campaigning against terrorism inspired by religion. The fact that Dr Schimmel has expressed her disapproval of the death sentence issued against Rushdie did not abate the criticism against her.

The only cheerful news in this sad episode is that the German President is still determined to hand the award to Dr. Schimmel and give a speech honoring her on Oct. 15. He described the protesters as "believers in the theory of clash of civilizations." He also emphasized the need for understanding and having a dialogue with the Islamic civilization. As to Dr. Schimmel, she has been asked lately "Is it true that you have described yourself as a 50% Muslim?" She answered: "This is at least. I love the Islamic civilization and always try to defend it, especially in today's world."

The whole affair has bewildered me for a while. Is it a crime to defend the feelings of Muslims ? Is it a crime for Muslims to express their anger at hurtful remarks ? Is it unacceptable in today's world that a religious group get angry when their sacred scripture is described as "Satanic" and the wives of their beloved Prophet are described as "whores" ? Is expressing indignation at offensive books wrong ? Should an outstanding scholar be punished for defending the abused group's right to express their true feelings ? Why did the West insist that Muslims were wrong when they reacted angrily to the publication of Rushdie's book ? Why did Western countries not accept Muslims' requests to put a ban on the book ?

Some Westerners would attribute the reason for the West's reaction to the desire of some Muslims to end Rushie's life. However, it is a known fact that so many Muslims have stated that killing Rushdie is wrong as a matter of principle and that attempts to kill him would give him so much credit, wealth, and fame that he otherwise could have never achieved. Furthermore, It is very clear from what happened to Dr. Schimmel that Western intellectuals still consider any person who criticizes Rushdie to be a wrongdoer regardless of that person's disapproval of Rushdie's killing. As a matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of Westerners would justify the West's attitude by citing the magic phrase "Freedom of Speech." If one argues with them "Do you mean absolute freedom of speech even offensive and hurtful speech?", they would proudly affirm:

"Yes unconditional freedom of speech. Anyone is entitled to express his/her views regardless of whether others will be pleased or offended by these views." If you ask them: "Is this theory practiced unconditionally in the West today?" So many would not hesitate to give an affirmative answer. At this stage one should say "It is not the first time in history that so many have been so wrong for so long." The truth of the matter is there is no such thing as absolute freedom of speech neither in the West nor any where else. Skeptics would, rightly, demand evidence for this claim. Here are some haphazardly collected examples that I have mostly encountered by chance while reading Western newspapers, magazines, and books in the last few months.

Let us start with Germany. In 1991, Guenter Deckert, leader of the ultra-right-wing National Democratic Party organized a lecture at which an American speaker claimed that the Auschwitz gassing of Jews never took place. Deckert was prosecuted and convicted for arranging the lecture under a statute prohibiting incitement to racial hatred. In March 1994 he was tried again. Finally, he was given only a suspended one-year jail sentence and a light fine. The judges were criticized by other judges for the light sentence.

The Federal Court of Justice overturned the light sentence and ordered another trial. The public was outraged by the series of events and the law responded. In April 1994, the German constitutional court declared that denials of the Holocaust are not protected by free speech. In order not to be outdone, the German Parliament passed a law declaring it a crime punishable by 5 years in prison to deny the Holocaust whether or not the speaker believes the denials.

A German publisher based in Munich withdrew and destroyed the German language version of an American book titled, Eye for an Eye, by John Sack (Basic Book, 1993) because it alleged that Stalin had deliberately chosen Jews to oversee secret police activities in the former German territories of post war Poland.

In Austria, one can get a prison sentence for denying the existence of the Nazi gas chambers. In 1992, the government modified the language of the law such that it would be considered a crime "to deny, grossly minimize, praise or justify through printed works, over the airwaves, or in any other medium the National Socialist genocide or any other National Socialist crime."

In Denmark, when a woman wrote a letter to a newspaper describing homosexuality as "the ugliest kind of adultery", she and the editor who published her letter were targeted for prosecution.

In Japan, a 250,000 circulation magazine, Marco Polo, carried, in its Feb. 1995 issue, an article claiming to present the new historical truth and argue that Nazi gas chambers are historically dubious. The reaction to the article was swift and severe. Major industrial firms such as Volkswagen and Mitsubishi cancelled their advertising in protest. The publishing house of

Marco Polo withdrew all copies of the February issue, announced that it was dismissing Marco Polo staff, and shut down the magazine itself.

In Australia, any unfair written material that could be described as inciting racial vilification is banned by the 1989 Anti-Discrimination act. The writer and the publisher of such material may be exposed to damages of up to $40,000.

In Britain, laws against blasphemy still exist. British Muslims tried to make use of these laws against Salman Rushdie. They discovered that only blasphemy against Christianity is outlawed. That is, one is free to blaspheme against the religion of one's neighbor as long as the neighbor does not happen to be a Christian. Therefore, the Satanic Verses was not proscribed. Ironically, a Pakistani movie ridiculing Rushdie and the whole affair of the Satanic Verses was banned from Britain.

In France, the French national assembly, in 1990, passed new laws to toughen the existing measures against racism, "The measures also outlaw revisionism -- a historical tendency rife among extreme right-wing activists which consists of questioning the truth of the Jewish Holocaust in World War II." Many intellectuals were disturbed by the words "measures" that "outlaw ... questioning" included in the French legislation.

In June 1995, Princeton University professor, Bernard Lewis, was fined $2,062 for having denied that Armenians were victims of genocide in Ottoman Turkey early in this century. Moreover, Lewis was ordered to publish the court ruling in the daily Le Monde and warned that he risked further judicial action if he repeats his denial on French soil.

Professor Lewis did not contest "the terrible human tragedy of the deportation" of the Armenians. But he considers that there was no "systematic annihilation" and that most of the victims died of "famine, disease, exhaustion or cold." That is why, in an interview published by Le Monde in November 1993, when he was asked why Turkey still refused "to recognize the genocide of the Armenians', Lewis replied: "You mean why do they refuse to recognize the Armenian version of that event?"

This comment led to a storm of protest from the Armenian community in Paris. Thirty university teachers published an open letter accusing Lewis of "betraying the truth and insulting the victims of Turkish brutality." At first they tried to prosecute Lewis under the Loi Gayssot, passed in 1990, which makes denying the Holocaust a criminal offense. But it was pointed out to the Armenians that the communist deputy Gayssot had restricted his new law to those denying the truth of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. It should be noted that Lewis is a historian whose specialty is the history of Ottoman Turkey.

He is recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on the subject. In Aug. 17, 1995, A

book published in Switzerland by the "Algerian committee of free activists" has been banned from entering French territory because "Its distribution is liable to affect public order...its underlying tone is anti-French", said the spokesman of the French interior ministry.

In the U.S., the government cannot do much to silence obnoxious speech because of the first amendment to the constitution. However, nongovernmental institutions, especially the media and the universities have taken the lead. At the University of Michigan, a student said in a classroom discussion that he considered homosexuality a disease treatable with therapy. He was summoned to a formal disciplinary hearing for violating the school's policy of prohibiting speech that victimizes people on basis of sexual orientation. The case has generated a lawsuit in federal courts. Another student who denounced Dr. Martin Luther King as a communist has been sentenced by his university's judicial board to thirty hours of community service.

The American Media has a long history of voluntary censorship. For example, a series of films which explained why Muslims were growing more furious with the West, were taken off-air in the US. Broadcasters were faced with a lobby against them and there was a threat to advertising. The films titled, Roots of Muslim Anger, were made by Dr. Robert Fisk who has received the British Press Award as the best British foreign reporter for "Foreign reporting at its finest." The reason for the intense lobbying against the series was that it considered Israel responsible for many Muslim grievances against the West.

An imposing scholar such as Noam Chomsky who has been described by the New York Times as "arguably the most important intellectual alive" has never appeared in any of the US major television networks because his views always upset the American elite. House speaker Newt Gingrich has dismissed a House historian when it was brought to his knowledge that she has once written: "The Nazi point of view, however unpopular, is still a point of view, and is not presented."

In the summer of 1995, The War Veterans Lobby (one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington) has lobbied successfully to remove all the material describing the tragedies caused by the American atomic bombs thrown on Japan in 1945 from a World War II exhibition in Washington. Several historians protested the move as enforcing a kind of "patriotically correct history" which has no thing to do with the "real history." In 1986, author George Gilder (whose book Wealth and Poverty was a worldwide best seller in 1981) had a great difficulty in finding a publisher to republish his earlier book, Sexual Suicide, because of protests from feminists who think (as one of them has recently said on ABC) that "Sexual differences should not even be studied."

Oxford University Press rejected Professor John Vincent's book, A Very Short Introduction to

History, which it had previously welcomed. The reason was that Vincent had not been politically correct. He had used the word "men" instead of "people", referred to historians as "he" thereby excluding women historians, etc.

Michael Jackson's latest album generated a wave of protest because some of the words therein were deemed racist by some American Jews. Charges of anti-Semitism prompted Jackson back to the studio to get rid of the offensive words.

In Canada, CTV Television network on its popular morning show "Canada AM" has, on Oct. 15, 1994, hosted Josef Lepid, a leading Israeli political commentator, who, on the air, called for "a decent Jew in Canada" to assassinate Victor Ostrovosky (a former Israeli intelligence officer and author of two books exposing Israeli intelligence secret operations). The incident received conspicuous silence in the Canadian media. The very same commentators who had clamored for Rushdie's right of free speech uttered no words in support of Ostrovosky's same right.

A couple of years ago, a British historian were giving lectures in Canada in which he denied the Holocaust. He was arrested and deported by the Canadian authorities. Also, a school teacher was relieved of all teaching duties because he taught his students to disbelieve that the Holocaust has ever happened.

A university professor wrote on his campus journal that a woman who had been raped by her partner should bear some of the responsibility for the rape especially if she was improperly dressed. His comments prompted a huge outcry on campus. He was forced into early retirement.

It seems that the West does not only lack absolute freedom of speech, it lacks absolute freedom of thinking as well. One might enjoy the hospitality of German prisons (for 5 full years) for 'believing' that the Holocaust has never happened. In France, one does not have to be a 'true believer', merely questioning the Holocaust will do. One wonders what should be the punishment if some people deny World War II altogether. Perhaps, they should be executed.

In North America, one would 'only' lose one's job for disbelieving in the Holocaust. This 'leniency' is perhaps due to the fact that American jails are overcrowded. Questioning the differences between men and women is a taboo that any 'decent' human being should not discuss. Charges of sexism are used to deter those who contemplate exceeding the acceptable limits. Discussions about homosexuality and race are similarly stifled.

The seldom acknowledged fact is that thought control does exist in the West. It is practiced by the governments, the media, the universities, and more importantly by the politically correct crowd. Several insightful Western intellectuals have recognized this fact. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville described America (at a time when America was considered the freest place in

the world) by saying: "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.

" George Santayana had this to say about the same theme: "There is no country in which people live under more overpowering compulsions...You must wave, you must shout, you must go with the irresistible crowd: otherwise you will feel like a traitor, a soulless outcast...In a country where all men are free, every man finds that what most matters has been settled for him beforehand."

It should not be construed however that freedoms of thought and speech are nonexistent in the West. Such a conclusion would be untrue and unfair. As a matter of fact, the West does enjoy more freedom of speech than anywhere else in the world today. One cannot ignore the freedom to protest, demonstrate, and strike provided by Western constitutions. One cannot disregard the relatively open and free discussions and debates taking place in parliaments and lecture rooms throughout the West. One cannot dismiss the role of Western media in exposing politician's misdemeanor as insignificant. For example, one cannot forget the role of the Washington Post in the Watergate affair.

Nevertheless, these freedoms are neither unlimited nor unconditional. Opinions which might irritate powerful groups, important interests, or significant segments of the population are silenced by many 'nonviolent' means. George Orwell in his article, The Freedom of the Press, has eloquently described the status of Western press: "Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark without the need for any official ban...[the] press is extremely centralised and most of it is owned by wealthy men who have every motive to be dishonest on certain important topics. But the same kind of veiled censorship also operates in books and periodicals, as well as in plays, films and radio.

At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question...Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the highbrow periodicals."

Let us now try to honestly address the ticklish question of free speech. Should there be freedom of speech? Certainly. Absolute freedom of speech? Certainly not. Why? Offensive speech have disastrous consequences affecting individuals and the society at large. It leads to the spread of hatred, animosity, and divisiveness. For example, how many human beings would accept others to accuse their mothers of being whores ? Should the society protect the freedom of speech of the accuser or the freedom from offensive speech of the accused? If one whole group in the society is denigrated as 'niggers' by another group, should the society

protect the freedom of speech of the offending group or the freedom from speech of the offended group?

If non-Jews accuse Jews of conspiring to exterminate all other races, whose freedom should be protected ? If men describe women as sources of all evil, whose freedom should be protected ? When a group of women, whom one billion Muslims revere more than their own mothers, have been gratuitously defamed by Rushdie as whores, whose freedom should have been protected ? In general, societies have little to lose and so much to gain by proscribing outrageous speech. In fact, all human societies have, to one degree or another, practiced freedom from speech. However, not all societies have been honest to admit what they practice. The Quran has been unequivocal in forbidding all kinds of insulting speech: "O you who believe Let not some men among you ridicule others: it may be that the latter are better than the former. Nor let some women ridicule others: it may be that the latter are better than the former, nor defame nor be sarcastic of each other, nor call each other by offensive nicknames..." (49:11)

However, in limiting freedom of speech for the purposes of social peace and harmony, no society should go to the extreme of "outlaw ... questioning." This is the mentality of the dark ages, the Inquisition, and some ailing dictatorial regimes. The whole world must struggle to wipe out all the traces of this mentality rather than enforcing it by democratic legislation. Objective inquiry must never be banned for any reason whatsoever. If some people, for whatever reason, exploit the freedom of inquiry to incite racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious vilification, then a line has to be drawn between benign and malicious motives without sacrificing the priceless freedoms of thinking, questioning, and inquiring. It is exactly the same line that has to be drawn to distinguish between freedom of speech and freedom from speech. The Canadian Supreme Court has recently (July 20) drawn a similar line in its decisive ruling on libel law: "criticism, yes, but accusations rooted in non-facts that do gratuitous damage to the reputation of individuals, no." The Quran does not only guarantee the freedom of thinking and questioning, it considers the act of thinking a sign of good faith.

Thinking and reflection are considered among the characteristics of righteousness: "In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for people of understanding. Those who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth.." (3:190-191) The Quran in its numerous arguments with the unbelievers cites compelling evidence for them; not to make them believe, but to make them think: "...Thus does Allah make clear to you His signs:

in order that you may reflect" (2:219) "...Such are the similitudes which We propound to people, that they may think" (59:21)

To sum up, the whole Rushdie affair and its protracted aftermath has never been a mere question of free speech in the West as any simple comparison between the fate of professor Lewis in France and the treatment professor Schimmel received in Germany would clearly reveal. The support which Rushdie has received in the West and the defamation which Dr. Schimmel has been subjected to in Germany have more to do with Western "Islamphobia" than with absolute freedom of expression.

The Western blatant indifference towards the feelings of Muslims is due to intense Western misunderstanding, suspicion, and fear of Muslims and Islam. Had the West really believed in and practiced absolute freedom of speech, then Muslims would have been very wrong to demand a ban on the Satanic Verses since it would have been a violation of a well-established Western tradition.

But the West has never practiced this imaginary absolute freedom of speech and probably never will. It is not at all unprecedented that Western publishing houses have voluntarily (for fear of fines or of upsetting the public) refrained from publishing a book. Upsetting Muslims, on the other hand, was deemed by the publishers of the Satanic Verses to make the book far more saleable.

The publishers realized the simple fact that Muslims in the West are neither powerful nor respectable and that perturbing them would attract the attention of so many readers who would have otherwise never paid any attention to the book. Muslims in the West are the least studied, the least understood, the least trusted, and the least respected minority group. According to a nationwide poll conducted for the American Muslim Council, 67% of Americans had favorable opinions of Roman Catholicism, 52% of Judaism, 39% of Christian fundamentalism and only 23% had a favorable opinion of Islam. Muslims in the West, especially in some European countries such as Germany, France, and Britain, live under conditions that can at best be described as contemptuous tolerance.

Therefore, my conclusion is that Muslims should not have reacted the way they did with respect to Rushdie's insults. They must learn how to create a respectable and powerful presence for themselves in the West first before asking the West to be considerate to their feelings. They ought to understand the lesson that something is far more deeply rooted in the Western tradition than free speech and that is: double standard.