

Freedom of Speech or Freedom from Hearing?

Should the press not be allowed to publish cartoons that may be offensive to Muslims? Should shop keepers refrain from saying “Merry Christmas”? Is it hate speech to express that practiced homosexuality is a sin according to the Bible? The discussions are many and the number of controversies increases regarding the freedoms of speech and religion in Europe and beyond.

At the very heart of these issues are freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Freedom of speech, notably, is foundational and essential for other freedoms and rights. Without it we have neither freedom of the press, nor any rights to open political debate, nor freedom to manifest religious beliefs, nor freedom of expression in art and music, et cetera.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights covers religious freedom. Article 18 of the declaration has three main components: to have, express and change your faith. This implies, among other things, the right to take faith into the public arena, to meet with others of same faith, as well as the right to change faith, i.e. to convert.

Increasingly there are attacks on the very foundation of democracy, even in the Western world. Some individuals from Muslim, secularist, and homosexual groups demand extraordinary restrictions on freedom of speech, which will negatively affect other human rights.

One example: In October 2007 a seemingly innocent advertisement in the Stockholm underground caused a national debate. The advertisement, sponsored by the Swedish Evangelical Alliance, promoted keeping the legal definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman. The ad simply said: “mum, dad, kids”. Some prominent politicians called for a ban of such messages. They argued that the ad could be perceived as offensive to people who are single, divorced or gays. Some even labeled it “hate speech”.

Another case in point: Pakistan was the agent for the Islamic Conference-backed resolution that was passed by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2007 in Geneva. The resolution’s basic message and purpose is to create a “criticism-free-zone” for Islam. It is worth noting that Islamic and other non-democratic countries voted for the resolution while democracies voted against.

The right and freedom to express one’s views and opinions in writing, speech, and art inevitably means that others may differ or even take offense. But that is the nature of freedom of speech. One cannot guarantee that no-one will ever be offended by a message - political, religious, or otherwise. One may say that Mohammed is the last prophet, another may disagree. Some will assert that Jesus is God and others may find that ridiculous or even offensive. Some may argue for homosexual marriages and others for limited abortion rights. But all these things are foundational for a functional democracy, which is based on individuals’ right to express and convey differing opinions.

Freedom of speech puts the emphasis on the speaker and what is said; the right to say basically anything, even things that are not true (for instance, that the earth is flat).

A worrying trend is the shift toward the *hearer* and to *what is being heard* or how things are perceived, including the possibility that an individual or group may feel hurt or offended by what has been expressed. This is a move from the objective (what was expressed) to the subjective (how was it received, perceived). This is contrary to fundamental Rule of Law principles.

So where are we going? Is there a trend toward “a right to NOT be offended” (in particular, it seems, for Muslims & homosexuals) and thus *limited* rights for others to express different opinions? “Freedom from hearing” kills freedom of speech. The ramifications are huge, a threat not only to religious liberty but to democracy itself - and thus, to everyone.

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