WHY ISLAM NEEDS FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The growing number of Muslims who are attempting to reform their faith are hurt most by limits on free speech, argues **Mohamed Rumman**

In debates about Islam in Australia, the biggest myth that needs debunking is that the Muslim community is one homogenous group. Of the nearly 500,000 Australians who identified as Muslim in the last Census, about 40% are Australian-born. The rest come from 183 countries, making Muslim Australians one of the most culturally diverse and heterogenous communities in the country. There are also significant differences in faith.[1]

Regardless of how much talk of unity community leaders espouse, they are divided on racial lines, sectarian lines, political lines and even ideological lines. A Lebanese Muslim, for example, would be represented by an organisation that would be separate to one representing Turkish Muslims, and even then the number of people from those communities who are engaged in those organisations is small relative to the rest of the population. This is important because when so-called community leaders release a statement condemning or condoning a certain act, they are only speaking about the sub-section of a sub-section within their communities—namely, those who are active within these groups.

That is to say: one opinion on a matter is not necessarily the view of the majority, because the majority were probably not even consulted in the first place. This is very frustrating for a lot of Muslim Australians who are too focused on living their lives, rather than having to defend themselves

because of the murderous acts of people who justify terrorism because of their faith. Or when they do come out and condemn terrorism it is insinuated that they are lying. One Nation's website effectively does this when it describes the practice of Taqiyya as a 'deliberate deception and lying to protect or advance Islam, by concealing its real agenda; One message to guide the Muslims, a separate one to fool the media and Kaffir [non-Muslims].'[2] Yet Taqiyya originates from a religious ruling or 'fatwa' during the Inquisition as a means to protect oneself when being forced to forgo religious belief or face death or persecution—a practice which ironically would be used if One Nation's policies on Islam become law. The halting of the construction of mosques, for example, would outsource religious education to granny-flat imams and underground prayer rooms hidden from public scrutiny.

Furthermore, when Islamic leaders in Australia have tried to condemn terrorist acts, they have managed to insensitively convolute the issue of extremism with racism

Mohamed Rumman is a libertarian Muslim studying at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). He is a former president of the UTS Liberal Club and Treasurer of the UTS Students Association. This article is based on his presentation to the 2016 Friedman conference in May.

and Islamophobia. The so-called Grand Mufti of Australia did just this in November 2015 after the Paris attacks with an initial statement about 'causative factors' that was interpreted in some quarters as justification for the attacks, and was thus quickly clarified two days later.[3] These leaders, who often don't speak English and have spent a large portion of their lives studying or living overseas, are themselves disconnected from the broader Australian-Islamic communities. They don't seem to grasp the ideas of liberalism or democracy, and would rather sweep the dirt under the carpet than confront the extremist cancer metastasising in our communities.

Ijtihad and the marketplace of ideas

There has always been competition in ideas: Labor or Liberal, DVD-HD or Blu Ray, even Tupac or Biggie. Normally, when a debate about video formats occurs, one side doesn't say to the other: 'Don't give your opinion, or I'll kill you'. The marketplace of ideas requires the freedom to put forward unpopular and even offensive views.

Most of us in the West think we have a monopoly on this framework—that only Western liberals could have come up with such a thing. The fact is Islamic thought has had a mechanism for the marketplace of ideas for centuries. It's called *ijtihad*, which roughly translates to diligence, or diligence in finding the truth. It essentially places the responsibility on individuals to use a decision-making process to understand and interpret their faith so long as it's based on the scriptures. Now many people would no doubt conclude that all extremist Muslims will do is take the parts that they say justify terrorism, violence and misogyny and don't have to be accountable to any central body. But the fact is extremists have destroyed and made forbidden the idea of independent reasoning. For instance, Wahhabism—which is often considered an ultra-orthodox sect of Sunni Islam and is promoted worldwide by Saudi Arabia—works on a rigid and literalist interpretation of Islam which makes reformation impossible.[4]

The periods of Islamic history where free thought flourished, pluralism was accepted and Islamic society was both culturally and doctrinally open to new ideas were the peak of Islamic achievement. The reason why the Hindu-Arabic number system is so-called is because Arabs took ideas around numeric systems in Indian society and ordered them in a way that made more sense. One of the reasons we can read Plato is that while the Dark Ages occurred in Western Europe, classical Greek texts were translated to Arabic, which also influenced Arabic and Islamic thought in that period. An important driver of the Renaissance was Venetian trade with the Egyptian economy. Those traders took on some of the ideas and transported them to Europe, not only reintroducing Greek and Roman classics to the West but also transmitting important advances in algebra and medical science that had been developed in Arabic universities.

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History therefore demonstrates that Islam is not incompatible with new ideas; indeed, historically it has been at its strongest when it engaged with the outside world and was willing to challenge fundamental precepts in a quest for knowledge and truth. It is possible for an open and liberal Islam to flourish; we have seen it happen before and the world will be better at the point when we can see it happen again.

One beacon of hope I have recently observed is an outcome of the Tunisian revolution; namely, the rise of the Ennahda movement. Ennahda, though affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is a moderate Islamic, economically liberal, right-wing political party in Tunisia. Ennahda's intellectual leader, Rached Ghannouchi, has spoken out against the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, and has criticised groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir for distorting interpretations of Islam, advocating for democracy instead. Much like centre-right Christian political parties in the West, Ennahda's policies are influenced by Islam but are implemented within a secular democratic system.

Tunisia is not alone. Moderate Islamic parties exist across the Muslim majority world, including in Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Empowering the voices of dissent within Islam

Islamic democracy, much like Christian democracy, will be essential in crushing the chokehold that Islamist theocrats have over the narrative of Islamic governance. Which is why freedom of speech is essential for the reformation of Islam and any attack on it is an attack on the growing number of Muslims attempting to reform their faith. In essence, it is an attack on religious liberty.

Dissenting voices within Islam are hurt the most by limitations on freedom of speech. These are gay Muslims, feminist Muslims and liberal Muslims, all of whom struggle to find support within their own communities let alone the wider public.

It's common for those on the left to jump eagerly to the defence of minorities perceived to be in distress in order to instantly indemnify them of any wrong. But this blindness to intolerance within minority communities leads to the degradation of woman's rights, homophobia, and justification of violence and terrorism. Instead of facilitating what Muslim activist Maajid Nawaz calls the 'racism of low expectations', it is our duty as Western liberals to empower those minorities within minorities.

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We need to be willing to set norms that make it impossible for debate to be shut down in our community. Currently, many Muslims look at the wider discourse in Australian society and see one that is heavily policed and restricted. Many of us do not see robust debate; we cannot see freedom of speech being held up as a virtue; we do not see people willing to slay sacred cows. These things are not happening in Australia. We are not living in a society that is willing to have uncomfortable arguments, and many Muslims have taken this attitude towards their own faith and culture. This makes it much harder for dissenting voices to gain traction in our internal debates; marginalised people stay marginalised because people are not challenging Muslims to accept those voices; and

where people do challenge these norms, it sounds hollow because the rest of the community isn't willing to be held to a similar standard.

The only way to empower these groups is not to shun them and limit what they can say because some may find it offensive, but to stand up for the fundamental principles of free speech. An important step in the right direction would be the repeal of 18C, which is the most visible symbol of our reluctance to debate. But we need to go further and accept that debate should make people uncomfortable, and that sacred cows need to be both debated and sometimes slain. A truly liberal commitment to free speech is not just legislative; we also need to be willing to be provocative and challenge what people think the world should look like.

Western media outlets have repeatedly refused to publish any cartoon depicting the Prophet— not out of respect for the Islamic tradition of not depicting the Prophet, but rather out of fear of repercussions from the hornets' nest of Islamic fundamentalism. Criticism of Islam is now a security risk. A stick figure of the Prophet, regardless of how innocuous it may be, can be censored because of the risk of offending some Muslims. Yet imagery of the Prophet Muhammed is not a black and white issue. Although a majority of Muslims believe that depicting Muhammed is offensive, Shiite Muslims are more tolerant about the rules surrounding it. There are visual depictions of the Prophet in Persian illustrations, unveiled. Meanwhile, we pander to the most extreme viewpoints as if they were—and until they become—mainstream. This mentality impairs the development of Islamic thought in the modern world, and risks stagnation of the modernisation of Islam in Western liberal democracies.

In a Muslim-majority country like Egypt, there are entire satellite TV channels dedicated to criticising Islam, albeit from a Christian perspective. Are we comfortable that countries with considerably less freedom than ours could have these debates while we sit idly by tangled in the tape of political correctness?

Once we shut down the channels of debate, we give the extremists exactly what they want: the

imposition of a strict and narrow interpretation of a religion. We let them decide what is and is not acceptable. And by doing so, we justify their worldview.

Regaining the courage of our institutions

That is not to say that Muslims should be freely harassed on the streets for wearing a hijab or growing a beard. The danger of a backlash against Muslims is real, and needs to be dealt with. The muzzling of discussion about Islam has festered an ignorant hatred amongst some members of the public. The fact that free and open debates are not being had has allowed ethnically-based nationalism to fester in some sectors.

One Nation's recent electoral success is a symptom of a fundamental failure of Islamic leadership in Australia. When some 500,000 Australians vote Pauline Hanson and her party into the Senate because they believe some of their fellow Australians are a threat to their existence, it's clear the messaging has collapsed. Extreme policies—such as One Nation's pledge to ban Muslim migration—may resonate with many Australians. But they are ultimately a threat to Australian pluralism and liberalism, and will divide and destroy us until we turn on fellow citizens, which is when the terrorists will have truly won.

In an interview on the ABC's *Insiders* program, Attorney General George Brandis exemplified the best way of tackling Pauline Hanson's views:

> What you do is throw the clear light of day on what they're saying and you explain why it's wrong . . . I've always believed that it is absolutely the wrong idea to try and silence such people [One Nation].[5]

We don't tackle these issues by changing the values that are the basis of our democracy. We don't pander to the most extreme views within Islam, like changing the equal rights of women, freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Sharia has no place in Australia. The rule of law is paramount, and the standards we set for one are for all.

At the same time, governments need to focus on the real issues that affect a lot of Australians, not just Muslims, such as unemployment and job insecurity, poverty, domestic violence and mental health. All these factors contribute significantly to radicalisation, particularly of young Muslims.

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For Islam to reform, however, we cannot change our basic freedoms. We cannot allow any group of militants or terrorists to affect our way of life. Doing so would do wrong to the growing number of Muslims across the world looking to reform their faith, and the cultures that come with it.

Endnotes

1   See Riaz Hassan, *Australian Muslims: A Demographic, Social and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia 2015* (Adelaide: International Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, 2015), https://www.unisa.edu.au/Global/EASS/MnM/Publications/Australian_Muslims_Report_2015.pdf

2   http://www.onenation.com.au/policies/islam

3   For the initial statement, see http://www.anic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ANIC-MOURNS-LOSS-OF-INNOCENT-LIVES-TO-TERRORIST-ATTACKS.pdf For the clarification two days later, see http://www.anic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/PRESS-RELEASE-THE-GRAND-MUFTI-OF-AUSTRALIA-CLARIFIES-STATEMENT-IN-RESPONSE-TO-PARIS-TERRORIST-ATTACKS.pdf

4   Wahhabism promotes a strict interpretation of sharia (Islamic jurisprudence) and has a history that dates back to the 18th century. Founded by Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, and championed by the House of Saud, the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism advocates the imposition of sharia by Mutaween (religious police) who enforce dress codes, fraternising with members of the opposite sex, and the five daily prayers.

5   Quote from interview with Fran Kelly, *Insiders*, ABC TV (24 July 2016), http://iview.abc.net.au/programs/insiders/NC1615V025S00