

Freedom of speech in a multicultural society

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Are some people's beliefs so deep, so integral to their personal, cultural and religious identities that the people and their beliefs should be legally and morally protected? Is it the case that in a democracy there can only be legitimate government if any and all views can be stated, heard and challenged? What are the costs and benefits of freedom of speech in a multicultural society?

Introduction and some background

On the three previous occasions on which I have spoken at the Multifaith Group I dealt with issues which I thought to be important from a humanist perspective. The last was: 'Beliefs and Identity'. Starting my preparation for this session it rapidly became clear that the issue of freedom of speech in a multicultural society is in a totally different league of complexity and significance. It increasingly dawned on me that this is a daunting task. I have frequently been dismayed at the content of some of the websites which I have visited as well as simply keeping up with the news. The good news is that I am now clearer than I have ever been about my own approach to freedom of speech. There are obvious links between this topic and my session on 'Beliefs and Identity'.

The last time I spoke to the Multifaith Group I referred to an old-fashioned saying oft used by my grandmother: *Children should be seen and not heard*.

This time I want to quote another: *Least said, soonest mended*.

Obviously both of these are to do with restrictions on speech. The former puts a restriction on the speech of children – and we've all experienced the embarrassments which can be caused when children speak 'out of turn' and without appreciating the subtleties of the social context. Children do not have a monopoly on these embarrassments !

But *Least said, soonest mended* is more general. It is based on the accurate assumption that to speak one's mind can have seriously detrimental consequences. A supplement could be: *Anything for a quiet life*. There's another saying which I am told hails from Yorkshire: *Hear all, see all, say nowt*. These suggest an anxious, defensive, cautious and perhaps fearful approach to speech. Safer to say nothing. Safer to conform. Safer to avoid risks. Safer to be conservative. Safer to submit and be submissive.

The underlying concerns behind these old sayings is that freedom of speech can be subversive to social order and personal relationships. It can threaten those in power and undermine their status and authority. And at an interpersonal level the danger is that freedom of speech will expose the everyday facades behind which we hide and which we strive to maintain.

It's a certainty that all of us practise restrictions on our freedom of speech. These self-imposed restrictions, this self-censorship, will relate to personal relationships, social context, fear of consequences, contravening the policy of the organisation in which we work, legal limits, the need to be accepted and fear of rejection, unwillingness to give offence, reluctance to damage the image which we think others have of us.

In other words: in practice there's no such thing as freedom of speech. Indeed Stanley Fish, (Professor of English and Law at Duke University), titles his book (1994): *There's no such thing as free speech . . . and it's a good thing too.*

There's no such thing as freedom of speech in a broader sense because all speech comes from a cultural context, expresses a particular perspective and represents specific interests. Speech is not free-floating and culture free. So when I refer to 'freedom of speech' it always needs to be heard with these qualifications. 'Freedom of speech' also includes 'freedom of expression'.

But a crucial point: speaking and expressing ourselves is how we become human and how we develop our humanity. Speaking and expressing ourselves is how we become and continue to be members of a society. To be excluded from a society's language is to be excluded, amongst other things, from freedom of speech in that society. (Jackson Preece 2005). Speech is always social and therefore always moral. And just as feminists of some decades ago asserted that the personal is political, so speech is political.

It is perhaps an indication of my naivety that I looked forward to preparing this talk. I started to prepare in April and I set off with what I think of as my usual optimistic enthusiasm. It turned into a very sobering experience which, in some respects, resulted in a sense of dismay. All was going well. I had done background reading. I collected a range of quotations mainly from the fall-out from the publication in Denmark of the now (in)famous cartoons.

Then I typed: 'freedom of speech in Islam' into the search engine. To my astonishment this is one of the opening responses: *AOL have erased a site without the owner's permission following a campaign by Muslims who claimed that its content was 'offensive'. The offence was of a theological nature.*

I was quite anxious about that information. A major internet service provider had censored someone's website contribution on the grounds of a complaint from a religious group. This was on the same day (13 April 2006) on which the new UK law came into effect making illegal the glorification of terrorism and the transmission of information about terrorism. Maximum sentence 7 years.

I have since accessed the article which AOL removed and to my mind it's a very reasonable but critical piece of writing. At the end of the article the author attaches a response he had received from a Muslim. Included in this response is a list of the most of the most insulting anti-Jewish so-called jokes which I have ever read.

How offensive the offended can become.

I had assumed that I would post this evening's talk on my own website, but to my astonishment I began to have anxious doubts about the wisdom of this. Discussing freedom of speech opens a Pandora's box.

Quotations - lots

My intention is to ensure that a range of historical and contemporary examples of freedom of speech and its problems and risks are on offer. I find these quotations impressive, some of them very moving and indicative of the benefits and costs of exercising freedom of speech. I will emphasise a major assumption at this point: these examples of freedom of speech clearly indicate the moral aspects of speech. Speech is not neutral.

Additional quotations are included in the separate Appendix.

I give priority to a quotation attributed to Socrates (469 – 399 BCE) who you will recall was sentenced to death for persisting in posing disturbing questions which threatened people:

If you offered to let me off this time on condition that I am not any longer to speak my mind in this search for wisdom, and that if I am caught doing this again I shall die, I should say to you: Men of Athens, I shall obey the God rather than you. While I have life and strength I shall never cease to follow philosophy and to exhort and persuade any one of you whom I happen to meet. And, Athenians, I should go on to say: Either acquit me or not; but understand that I shall never act differently, even if I have to die for it many times.

You may recall the meeting between Nathan the prophet and King David. King David had recently arranged for the husband of a woman whom he fancied to be put in to the front line of battle with the expectation of his being killed. Thus David would be able to take the man's wife. Nathan's morality tale went as follows: There was a wealthy and greedy man who owned many sheep, but he desired the only and much loved sheep of a poor farmer. So the wealthy man stole the poor man's sheep. What should happen to the man? In kingly anger David said: Who is this man? He should be killed. To which Nathan famously replied with all the enormous risks involved in freedom of speech spoken to the powerful: Thou art the man!

Mark chapter 3, vv 1-6. They brought a man with a withered arm to Jesus on the Sabbath to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath so that they could bring charges against him. Jesus said: Is it permitted to do good or evil on the Sabbath? They had nothing to say. He looked around at them with anger at their obstinate stupidity. He said to the man: Stretch out your arm. He stretched it out and his arm was restored. But the Pharisees, on leaving the synagogue, began plotting against him to see how they could destroy him.

The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof, or abridging freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peacefully to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Thomas Jefferson.

Charles Bradlaugh. Without free speech no search for truth is possible. . . no discovery of truth is useful. . . Better a thousandfold abuse of free speech than the denial of free speech. The abuse dies in a day, but the denial slays the life of the people and entombs the hope of the race.

John Stuart Mill, 2006 being the 200th anniversary of his birth. The 'Introduction' to his famous essay 'On Liberty': The subject of this Essay is . . . Civil or Social liberty; the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. . . The Struggle between Liberty and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar . . . if any opinion is compelled to silence that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Einstein. Nothing in the world makes people so afraid as the influence of the independent mind.

Stewart Lee the co-creator of 'Jerry Springer - The Opera' in the 'Times Higher Education Supplement' 31 March 2006. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I look forward to living in a genuinely multicultural society and a genuinely global world where non-sectarian education means we all know enough about each other's cultures to be able to use them in the service of art, music, theatre and, yes, comedy from an informed position of strength.

In his article he pointed out that there had been 60,000 complaints to the BBC about the opera **before it had been broadcast**. TV executives were given police protection when their addresses were published on the 'Christian Voice' website. 'Christian Voice' persuaded Sainsbury's to withdraw the DVD from sale and prompted a cancer charity to reject proceeds from a benefit performance. One of the BBC executives received death threats. Another Christian organisation, the Christian Institute, initiated blasphemy charges against the BBC but these were rejected by the High Court.

(Anonymous, quoted in Dennett (2006 p17). Philosophy is questions that may never be answered. Religion is answers that may never be questioned.

Consensus is the enemy of thought. Irwin Stelzer

Responsibility *requires* freedom. (Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate in Economics quoted in Sacks 2003 p 116).

Ronald Dworkin, Professor of Jurisprudence. 'New York Review of Books' 23 March 2006. There is a real danger, however, that the decision of the British and American press not to publish (the cartoons) though wise, will wrongly be taken as an endorsement of the widely held opinion that freedom of speech has limits, that it must be balanced against the virtues of 'multiculturalism' and that the Blair government was right after all to propose that it be made a crime to publish anything 'abusive or insulting' to a religious group. Freedom of speech is not just a special and distinctive emblem of Western culture. . . . Free speech is a condition of legitimate government. Laws and policies are not legitimate unless they have been adopted through a democratic process and a process is not democratic if government has prevented anyone from expressing his convictions about what those laws and policies should be. . . No one's religious conviction can be thought to trump the freedom that makes democracy possible.

The cure for fallacious arguments is better argument not the suppression of ideas. Carl Sagan. Distinguished scientist. 1934 – 1996.

The 'Euston Manifesto' public launch 25 May 2006. Freedom of ideas.

13 We uphold the traditional liberal freedom of ideas. It is more than ever necessary today to affirm that, within the usual constraints against defamation, libel and incitement to violence, people must be at liberty to criticize ideas – even whole bodies of ideas – to which others are committed. This includes the freedom to criticize religion: particular religions and religions in general. Respect for others does not entail remaining silent about their beliefs where these are judged to be wanting.

We stand against all claims to a total – and unquestionable or unquestioning – truth.

At the United Nations ‘World Press Freedom Day 2006’ the editor-in-chief of the German paper ‘Die Welt’ gave a classic defence of freedom of expression. He had done what no British editor had done and printed the Danish cartoons of Muhammad. He received the customary death threats but didn’t regret it because: ‘it is essential to protect freedom of expression because of all the pain we have invested to keep our liberal, secular society’. (‘The Observer’ 14 May 2006).

David Willetts, ‘Any Questions’ 27 May 2006 on George Galloway’s comments on understanding the moral grounds for assassinating Tony Blair. ‘There’s a difference between having the right to say something and it being right to say something’.

M F Hussain’s Asian art exhibition was mounted at the Asia House gallery in the West End of London. He has an international reputation. The Indian High Commissioner claimed, at the opening, that Hussain was India’s greatest modern artist. The exhibition was to have run until August 2006. The show closed on Monday 22 May after threats of violence from an anonymous Hindu fundamentalist group. They complained that Hussain’s art offended the sentiments of the Hindu community in the UK. They demanded public apologies from everyone who had to do with the exhibition including the High Commissioner. (‘The Observer’ 28 May 2006).

Honderich. We can do a real thing as well, which is to think and feel, think and feel for ourselves. (2006 p 2)

Philip Pullman: (‘Against ‘Identity’ in Appignanesi 2005 p 107).
Britain is still officially a Christian country. For a long time now, the kind of religion the Church of England embodies has been a mild, tolerant, broad-minded sort. There have been zealots but they have tended to leave and form their own sects. But this involved a certain amount of not-speaking-about-things. For example, there have always been clergy who had homosexual feelings, but while these remained unspoken about (‘don’t ask, don’t tell’) it never became an issue of public discussion, denunciation, exposure, justification, confession, condemnation, punishment and so on. . . . it now looks as if it might split the Anglican communion in two. In the concise and unambiguous words of a poster brandished by an American preacher in a recent photograph: ‘*God hates fags*’.

Quotations from the text of the Human Rights Act 1998. My source of these quotations is Francesca Klug’s book: ‘Values for a Godless Age’ 2000. Penguin.

Everyone’s right to life shall be protected by law.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observation.

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health and morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

The exercise of these freedoms carries duties and responsibilities.

The topic of freedom of speech is one of the most contentious issues perhaps in any society but certainly in a liberal, secular, multicultural and democratic society – and particularly now. Free speech becomes a volatile issue the more highly it is valued because only then do the limitations placed upon it become controversial.

Principles, assumptions, perspectives.

It is evident that the major sources of prohibition of the aspiration to freedom of speech are: religious, political and personal. And of course, these interact. A common feature is that freedom of speech is a threat to those in power.

I will state my own general principles, or perhaps assumptions. They inevitably reflect the culture in which I live and move and have my being. They have guided my thinking on the topic and they have changed during my preparation for this session. They are drawn from living in a culture which has been deeply influenced by the Enlightenment.

First, my general principle can be stated as an answer to the following questions:

Should the words and writings of the founders of religions and political movements, their venerated documents, religious rules and creedal statements be accepted without debate, challenge, scepticism and even contradiction ? My answer is: No.

Should the spoken and written beliefs and speech assertions of any person or group be accepted without debate, challenge, scepticism and even contradiction ? My answer is: No.

But there is no such thing as total freedom of speech. This for at least two reasons.

- 1 There's no such thing as complete freedom. Everything we do is constrained by social, cultural and physical restrictions. Our very being is constrained. We are only 'free' within limits of which we are often not even conscious.
- 2 All speech comes from a particular cultural context and unavoidably expresses a particular perspective. Speech is always limited. Speech is a social, moral and political act as well as being personal.

There are three interacting concepts which I assume are necessary in any society which is attempting to give multicultural voices a valid say:

Democracy

Law

Freedom of speech/expression

So, to misquote St Paul, there abide these three: but the greatest of these is freedom of speech. But these concepts are not static, not cast in stone. In a sense they are in stark contrast to beliefs which are backward-looking, traditional, ritualistic, scripture-based and credal.

Democracy, law and freedom of speech are always in constant, dynamic and insoluble tension requiring challenge, review and change.

Tendencies to tyranny and oppression are ever present – even under the guise of democracy. Freedom of speech is the main bulwark against political and religious tyranny.

Mara Evans was recently prosecuted for reading out the names of British soldiers killed in Iraq at the Cenotaph within 1 km of the Houses of Parliament. She was the first to be convicted under the new Serious Organised Crime and Police Act, 2005. I can hardly believe what I have written. The juxtaposition of: reading out a list of names of the dead - the Cenotaph - ‘Serious Organised Crime’ - prosecution. It is surreal.

Tony Blair said in 2000 about a demonstration outside Downing Street: *I disagree with what you are saying but thank God you are free to say it.* No longer - unless you have police permission.

It may sound strange but I propose that freedom of speech is ever more important in a multicultural society. I agree with Blair 2000 model.

When we begin to make exceptions to freedom of speech based on sensitive and defensive ideologies and religions then we are on the road to being dominated by these special interest groups. Religions and religious believers should only have the same kinds of protection available to all other members of society. Freedom of speech should be kept as open as possible – *the more so not the less so in a multicultural society.*

Of course, the freedom of speech in a multicultural society which I am advocating does not make for a calm, placid, conflict-free society. Freedom of speech will cause offence. Freedom of speech will cause hurt. Freedom of speech will be threatening. But freedom of speech within the law – and the freedom to challenge unjust laws – is, as far as I can see, the only way for different cultures to live together within a democratic and reasonably open society. Diverse voices need to be heard.

Martin Luther King’s was a diverse voice. He had an illegal dream of freedom for which his freedom was removed. He spent time in Birmingham City Gaol. But his dream of

freedom was a moral challenge to unjust and discriminatory laws. He had a profoundly moral dream. He exercised the freedom of speech to talk about freedom.

Those who feel offended have a right to express their sense of offence – but within the law. The possibility of being offended should not undermine either democracy or freedom of speech within the law. That's the nature of democracy.

As Benjamin Franklin wisely said: *If all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would offend nobody there would be very little printed.*

Another of my broad assumptions is that the human species of animal with brains the size of ours has an enormous range of potentials. I simply need to mention art, literature, music, philosophy, science, social structures, religions, political systems and so on. The development, enrichment and enhancement of human potential depends on freedom of speech and expression.

If human beings are to move beyond the traditional, beyond the beliefs of the tribe or herd, beyond the constant repetition of learned, ancient and received thoughts and behaviours; if human beings are to move out of the prison of the past, in other words if we are to develop our diverse potentials as human beings, then we need to be able to express ourselves freely. But, of course, within the law.

Because I know little about Islam I was completely amazed that on the Ayatollah Sistani's website there are 145 pages of detailed permissions and prohibitions which are incumbent upon Muslims. I was depressed by the imposition of uniformity. A culture of clones. But of course from his point of view he knows the truth and everyone should live in total conformity to his truth. I have no need to say that there are no injunctions supporting freedom of speech !

I believe that we all have the right to hold and express our beliefs to each other, within the law and without evoking the threat of death or of punishment in the here and now or eternal punishment in hell.

My view of life is that we are accountable only to each other. Therefore we need to speak freely in careful conversation as to how we might most productively exercise our mutual accountability.

To put the matter somewhat briefly: Democracy rather than theocracy and political ideology is the only context in which freedom of speech is feasible, encouraged and deemed desirable. Conversely, cultures of certainty are cultures of control and conflict.

Oppression, brutality, illegal imprisonment, segregation, humiliation, discrimination, marginalisation, exclusion, being threatened with terror - all make us strangers to each other because we lose the empowerment of freedom of speech and dialogue. We become not just strangers but angry strangers.

As the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2003 p 151) points out: *If we were always and only strangers to one another we would have no reason to trust one another.* I suggest that we

can only cease to become strangers to each other when we learn how to speak freely to each other.

Human diversity is a fact of human experience. You may recall that the Chief Rabbi wrote his important book: 'The Dignity of Difference' in 2002. He was vitriolically criticised by some fellow rabbis for his valuing of diversity, for asserting that other faiths may have truths about God and for exercising freedom of speech to express his views. Another sad fact is that he made some retractions and published a revised version in 2003. Freedom of speech, or merely the expression of a different point of view, is not only a threat across religions and cultures but even within religious groupings. However, the validity of the main thrust of his book remains – and this is his commitment which I share:

(conversation) is the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own). Each is a genuine form of respect, of paying attention to the other, of conferring value on his or her opinions even though they are not mine. . . . In a conversation neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what reality looks like from a different perspective. That is how public morality is constructed in a plural society. . . . by a sustained act of understanding and seeking to be understood across the boundaries of difference. (2nd edition, 2003 p 83).

The optimistic sub-title of his book is: *How to avoid the clash of civilizations.*

Conversation is based on a degree of freedom of speech not on cultural domination or the suppression of ideas.

Alan Ryan, philosopher and Master of New College, Oxford says this in his current review of three books * in the New York Review of Books (22 June 2006):

In Cosmopolitanism Appiah suggests that if people with vastly different religions, sexual and political attachments are to live together without violence they must master the art of conversation. . . . We live in one world, but have many ways of interpreting it . . . the world allows plenty of leeway for interpretation. To understand what we do and do not have in common, we can only engage in conversation with each other, and since the human species and each of its members deals with the world with a variety of interpretive techniques, there is much to talk about. (NYRB p 46).

* Appiah K A Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers. Norton
Sen A Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny. Norton
Nussbaum M C Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership. Harvard University Press

It has been well said that there's no point in going on a journey if the journey does not change you. I say: there's no point in having a conversation if you're not prepared to change your mind. Closed minds don't have conversations – they exchange monologues. As I've said many times: there's no dialogue with dogma. There's only dialogue in a democracy.

It was Amartya Sen who recently coined the interesting term: poly-monoculturalism. He refers to the danger of groups speaking but not listening to each other. Speech but no conversation.

The main source of difference and diversity – and therefore the potential for development, enrichment and enhancement – is freedom to use language. But it's not plain sailing.

Perils - or at least problems

I recall that Caliban in 'The Tempest' said:

You taught me language and my profit on't is: I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language.

That's an inherent risk of the acquisition of language - the risk that we use language merely to curse each other. Dogmatic fundamentalists have a strong tendency to condemn those who believe differently in the strongest possible terms. You remember the offensively homophobic quotation from Philip Pullman: *God hates fags*. That's a form of curse from a homophobic Christian.

In a review of Jimmy Carter's book: *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (NYRB 9 February 2006) the reviewer said this: The marks of this new Christian fundamentalism, according to Carter, are rigidity, self-righteousness and an eagerness to use compulsion. Its spokesmen are contemptuous of all who do not agree with them one hundred percent. The Reverend Pat Robertson, (a leading Christian fundamentalist and a Southern Baptist) typified the new 'popes' when he proclaimed: *'You say you're supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and Presbyterians and Methodists . . . Nonsense. I don't have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist'*.

It's not quite a curse but it doesn't exactly take the author of the Sermon on the Mount as its role model !!

Caliban had a profoundly disturbing point.

What's the point of being free to think if I am cursed for expressing my thoughts or cursed if I express my sense of being ?

The issues of gender and sexuality are useful indicators of people's attitude to freedom of speech.

If I live in a society or belong to an organisation in which I am unable to speak about and express my sense of my gender and my sexuality then this is worse than censorship of speech - it is censorship of my very being. Many religions perpetuate profound oppression of women (misogyny) and sexual diversity (homophobia). Misogyny and homophobia are forms of curses and are severe denials of freedom of expression. The Pope has declared homosexuality an 'objective disorder' and urged seminaries to 'weed out' homosexuals. He has stated that women can never become priests.

The election of a woman bishop in America was stated to have 'stunned the Christian world' ('The Guardian' 19 June 2006). Rowan Williams chose not to send an immediate letter of congratulation. The aggression and prejudice directed against Bishop Gene Robinson is eloquent testimony to homophobia. Some Christians refer publicly to homosexuality as bestiality. Other religions are even worse – gays are killed. The misogyny and homophobia which are inherent in the beliefs and practices of many religions actually contribute to and exacerbate the problems experienced by women and gay people in society generally.

The brutal murder of the gay man Jody Dobrowski is a recent example of what I mean. I was deeply impressed with the dignified and humane speech by his mother after the conviction of his murderers.

In a free and democratic society, Jody's murder was an outrage. It was a political act. It was an act of terrorism. Jody was not the first man to be killed, or terrorised, or beaten or humiliated for being homosexual. Tragically he will not be the last man to suffer the consequences of homophobia which is endemic in this society. This is unacceptable. We cannot accept this. No intelligent, healthy or reasonable society could.

I've not heard any major religious leader speak out to condemn homophobic attitudes in their religions or society. Nor have I heard religious leaders espouse equality of opportunity as a policy for their organisations' appointments and promotions. I actually find it offensive that religions are allowed to be exempt from the law on equality of opportunity in employment practices. A humane and notable exception is Archbishop Desmond Tutu who describes homophobia as a form of apartheid. He's in the best position to use the term.

Michael Hampson ('The Guardian' 26 June 2006) said:

The American church is to be commended for quietly carrying on with its life. The entire Anglican community has risen up against it, Lambeth Palace included. But it has chosen to maintain its dignity. Last week Katharine Jefferts Schori became the first woman leader of an Anglican church anywhere in the world when she was appointed to head the US Episcopalian and said there should be 'room at the table' for gay and lesbian members of the church.

Equality of opportunity, equality of worth and equality of treatment are closely linked to freedom of speech. Religions are not noted for their commitment to these three equalities. Hence some members are afraid to speak out and to express themselves. They fear prejudice and rejection.

I can see why people use pseudonyms in their websites. But not all use pseudonyms and they incur wrath.

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, the author of the play *Behzti*, has a letter included in the challenging book edited by Lisa Appignanesi (2005). The letter starts:

As a writer I lead a quiet life, so nothing could have prepared me for the furore and intense media interest in the past few weeks. I am still trying to process everything that's happened. – my play Behzti has been cancelled. I've been physically threatened and verbally abused by people who don't know me. My family has been harassed and I've had to leave my home. Firstly I have been deeply angered by the upset caused to my family and I ask people to see sense and leave them alone. . . Religion and art have collided for centuries and will carry on doing battle long after my play and I are forgotten. The tension between who I am, a British born Sikh woman, and what I do, which is write drama, is, I think, at the heart of the matter. . . I believe that it is my right as a human being and my role as a writer to think, create and challenge. Theatre is not necessarily a cosy space designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It is a place where the most basic human expression – that of imagination – must be allowed to flourish.

I find this deeply moving. To be imaginative and creative is perilous if you challenge the dogmatic and bigoted. That's what the producer of 'Jerry Springer – The Opera' discovered.

In Holland the film-maker Theo van Gogh was murdered by a Muslim and a 5 page letter of demands was attached to the chest of the dead man.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali collaborated in writing the script of van Gogh's film which explored aspects of the oppression of some Muslim women in Dutch society. She has campaigned about the abuses suffered by these women. She is now living under a fatwa and has a 24 hour police protection unit to guard her life. She is under sentence of death. She has decided to leave Holland and live in Washington. (See Lisa Jardine's BBC Radio 4: 'Point of View' 5 June 2006).

The furore over the cartoons resulted in huge responses. Some of these responses surprised me. Others dismayed me. Overall I was left with some issues and questions which I realised that I had never addressed in depth and detail before. I seemed to have been rather naïve in my assumption that freedom of speech is a given in democratic societies.

To me, the comments of the Danish Prime Minister were among the most astonishing. He has described the controversy of ‘the cartoons’ as Denmark’s worst international crisis since the Second World War.

Literature on the history of cartoons shows that they have had very challenging and, from the point of view of my values, generally beneficial effects.

Satire, cartoons, lampooning and humour have had, and still have, power to shock, disturb, irritate, anger, frustrate. They challenge arrogance, power, hypocrisy, bigotry and they create juxtapositions which allow new ways of thinking.

After the initial furore following the publication of the cartoons in Denmark the Anglican Church in Wales withdrew all copies of a church magazine. The reason? There was a cartoon included in the magazine in which Jesus was portrayed saying to Muhammad: *Don’t worry – it’s happened to us all!* The editor felt it necessary to resign. The Archbishop of Wales sent a letter of apology to the Muslim leadership in Wales.

Perhaps the problem can be put in the following way:

Freedom of speech including criticism and humour can be devastating and threatening to those for whom their beliefs are the only true beliefs and who assume that their beliefs have been ordained and revealed by the only true God. Their beliefs are literally sacred, taboo, untouchable. The *sacred* and *mockery* are just about as inimical as you can get.

Prospects and possibilities

British society has always been multicultural based on considerable diversity but I haven’t always appreciated this. I have always been a member of what I slowly came to realise is the dominant group – white, heterosexual, male. That sort of unconscious dominance makes a lot of things seem ‘the same’ when in fact they are ‘different’. But no culture provides a totally monolithic experience.

The problems of multiculturalism have always been with us and British law and democracy have made various attempts to address the problems.

I was interested to read the article in ‘The Guardian’ (14 June 2006) in which Professor Cesarani, Research Professor in History, Queen Mary, University of London reported on the 350th anniversary of the first purpose-built Jewish synagogue ‘Bevis Marks’. *The Jewish experience is one of struggle and negotiation. Jews encountered enemies, but found allies too. They discovered a way to preserve vibrant ethnic identity and foster cultural and religious continuity. Their journey offers warning, but also inspiration, to immigrants from the multitude of ethnic and faith groups entering Britain today.*

Diversity can be managed – and can even manage to be enriching, but there is *struggle and negotiation*.

My own sense of being and cultural identity, my beliefs and values are shaped by the concepts and processes known as ‘The Enlightenment’. The complex interaction between social, political, scientific, intellectual, philosophical and literary developments known in summary as ‘The Enlightenment’ took hold in the West and challenged and loosened all sorts of traditional assumptions. The challenges related to:

- the nature and origins of the world
- the divine right of kings
- the nature of human nature
- forms of political systems
- options for the expression of human potential
- imagined ways of being created in novels and plays
- and of course, emphasis on the individual and notions of the freedom of the individual.

Freedom of service in uniform obedience to God began to transmute into: freedom to question and to doubt, freedom to criticise, freedom to invent different world views, freedom to apply reason. The freedom to be a different kind of person was one of the massive results of the Enlightenment. Difference became possible, valued and of course highly problematic.

In terms which Jonathan Sacks uses for the title of his book: you can’t have ‘The Dignity of Difference’ without the possibility of freedom of speech which is the basis of conversation. In an important sense the Enlightenment created the conditions for different kinds of conversations.

My strong preference is for conversation rather than conflict.

I am deeply committed to a democratic society and by the same commitment I am necessarily committed to a multicultural society. Freedom of speech in a complex multicultural society is ever more important because there is an ever greater diversity of voices needing to be heard.

I totally oppose creating terror as a means of getting one’s own way – whether in interpersonal relationships (known as bullying, intimidation, coercion) or within and between states. Terror, in my value system, is totally unacceptable because it demeans, abuses and threatens people. Terror prevents any sense of well-being. I would imagine that being in Forest Gate felt like being at the receiving end of police terror.

Terror imprisons people in their anxiety. Terror is the antithesis of conversation.

I therefore have sympathy with Einstein’s somewhat pessimistic view:

Only two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity, and I’m not sure about the former.

A fundamental benefit of democracy from my perspective is that any group with power can, eventually, be voted out by the people. Having said that I'm reminded of one of Ken Livingstone's typically acerbic statements some years ago: *If voting changed anything they would ban it !!*

Freedom of speech in a multicultural society will always be a problem because one person's speech expression is always likely to upset and anger some others. As George Orwell said:

If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they don't want to hear. (Preface to 'Animal Farm').

A rather anxious conclusion

I will end with my own personal statement which I could probably have made even before I started to prepare in April, but I now know much more clearly why I have arrived at it. Shades of T S Eliot. *

Democratic multiculturalism is, as far as I can see, the only slender hope for us as human beings to live together in grudging tolerance or, even better, mutual respect. With all the difficulties and tensions of democratic multiculturalism it's a better bet than trying to oppress and destroy other people who don't agree with us.

If we cannot speak freely within the law, if any group tries to dominate the democratic discourse and to suppress others' speech, then we shall remain strangers to each other. A multicultural society – indeed I suspect any society – will founder if its people remain strangers to each other.

In spite of many complications, many potential and actual hazards I come down on the side of freedom of speech. I cannot accept that my way of living is to live in the prison of someone else's dogma. I prefer to live in a society in which there is diversity based on one simple assumption: there is no philosophy, no ideology, no religion which has the total truth about human beings. With all its tensions, conflicts, experiences of offence, freedom of speech is the affirmation of the validity of diversity.

I am profoundly reluctant to have my choice about freedom of speech and my sense of being determined or influenced by those who want me to feel terrified, threatened, anxious, inhibited.

I shall not allow my freedom of expression to be determined by the various hells to which others condemn me.

* We shall not cease from exploration, And the end of all our exploring, Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time. 'Four Quartets'.

I note that Osama bin Laden is reported to have said that all freethinkers should be killed. I also note that George Bush has said: *Those who are not for us are against us*. There is no hope in either of these positions. And I need to feel free to say so.

I conclude that if as a society we make laws which are based on fear, if we privilege dogmatic interest groups then we are in danger of changing the very nature of the complex, tense and changing relationship between law, democracy and freedom of speech. Dworkin's statement is crucial to my position: *No one's religious conviction can be thought to trump the freedom that makes democracy possible*.

In a reflective sense of trepidation with which I did not start out on my preparation, I assert that I believe in freedom of speech within the law in a multicultural society. I also believe in the freedom to challenge the law.

Two final quotations.

First, a word from that great disturber of the placid.

The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher regard those who think alike than those who think differently. Stand up: Freddie Nietzsche !!

Second. I have been impressed with Tony Benn's 'famous five' questions ever since I heard them years ago. They are questions which arise from and celebrate freedom of speech.

- 1 What power have you got ?
- 2 Where did you get it from ?
- 3 In whose interests do you use your power ?
- 4 To whom are you accountable ?
- 5 How can we get rid of you ?

Democracy, law and freedom of speech are always in constant and insoluble tension. All three are necessary in order to avoid living in ghettos of fear and exclusion.

Perhaps what our society needs is to have a well resourced national conversation to explore the possibility of arriving at a common core of values across cultures which can attract some form of deep consensus. A society inclusive in terms of common values and diverse in terms of cultures.

Such common values might encourage us to speak more freely, more confidently, more inclusively and more courteously to each other in a multicultural society.

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<http://energygrid.com/society/2006/02ap-cartoons.html>

This website contains a very interesting essay on some of the issues around the publication of the (in)famous cartoons in the Danish press.

Wikipedia website. Freedom of speech. This provides a useful summary. Also summary of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006.

David van Mill 2002. Internet article titled: Freedom of Speech. (dvanmill@arts.uwa.edu.au)

Is it more in keeping with the values of a democratic society, in which every person is deemed equal, to allow or prohibit speech that singles out specific individuals and groups as less than equal ?

See British Humanist Association website (www.humanism.org.uk) for their response to Government legislation of equality of opportunity titled: 'Getting Equal: Sexual orientation discrimination in the provision of goods and services'.