



Discussion Forum 1 – FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Held on Tuesday 19th May 2015 at 6:30pm for 7pm start

At Chaul End Community Centre, 515, Dunstable Road, Luton LU4 8QN

Charlie Hebdo is a French satirical weekly newspaper that has never spared anyone or anything, from politics to religion, including Islam. On 7th January 2015, the magazine's Paris newsroom was attacked. Twelve people were killed, including four prominent cartoonists. According to almost all reports, the attack occurred because of the treatment of the image of Prophet Mohammed in some cartoons. "We have avenged the prophet," one of the murderers had allegedly said. The attack was interpreted as a threat to the freedom of the press in general and of satire in particular. The issue has led to a discussion about satire and its boundaries and the result since then has been a vast international debate around the whole idea of Freedom of Speech/Expression/Press etc.

However, this was not the single reason why LCoF¹ had teamed up with GRASSROOTS² to organize this discussion. Repeatedly and quite consistently over past few years, the issue has been raised in various parts of the world, picking or affecting (however one may feel) not just on Muslims or Islam but also at times on other faiths including Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Hence a reflective discussion on the issue was held for people from diverse or no particular religious backgrounds.

Keynote Speaker Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (Ugandan-born British journalist and author) started off by acknowledging how difficult this subject is and how complex questions and answers regarding it can be. Some poignant comments she made are adapted and added to in the following bullet points:

- Man and woman are born free. After we are born all kinds of chains are put around us i.e. of religion, ethnicity, race, colour, nationality etc.
- On one hand, these are essential components in the making of who we are as part of our diverse world, but on the other hand, these limit our freedoms too, in order to keep traditions of social orders prevalent in our respective societies and communities.
- However, history is evident that whenever our freedoms are (either in reality or perceived to be) curtailed, consciously in the very name of race, religion or ethnicity, it forms the basis for exploitation to wage justified wars and provoke mindless violence between nations and communities.
- Coming to the British context, Freedom of Speech is one such issue which appears to be curtailing the freedom of many people. However, sometimes the debate around Freedom of Speech appears to be false, as though there is a '*perfect freedom*' and from somewhere bad people (Muslims) have suddenly arrived and are now making life difficult for everyone.

¹ Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) is an independent voluntary group of members and leaders from different faith communities, constantly seeking to engage with communities and individuals, of faith or of no faith, to strengthen community cohesion in Luton.

²GRASSROOTS is a Christian ecumenical educational programme of community engagement, working with Churches as well as with different faith communities in Luton. Emphasising on community building in a participatory way, its work is about promoting inclusion and a spirituality of justice for peace. GRASSROOTS strives to uncover, in dialogue with the Churches and other faith communities, a sharp edge of engagement with contemporary issues, in and around Luton.



- It is important to recognize that we all have lines. Even Salman Rushdie has one. We need to identify where those lines are. Problems arise when we all have different aspirations and different targets to draw our lines.
- However, living in a globalized world which is full of multi-layered religious, racial, cultural and national diversity, it becomes imperative that responsibilities, of where each one of us wants to draw our lines, are collectively held. Any conflicts of interest must be resolved by generating an honest debate and discussion with a view to generate consensus, with a sense of mutual respect and responsibility towards one another.
- These days, in our globalized world, suspicion and fear of being taken over by those in any form of power (be it at a religious, national, governmental, community or individual level) is hugely competitive. Everyone appears to be claiming their fear of the other as the greater and greatest. Government Censorships are increasing all around the world. However, we know that the powerful nations, with their endless greed and lust for wealth, power and control, always gets away taking more than they deserve (or more than they really need). It therefore does invite opposition and there is nothing wrong in that, as long as it is done non-violently, democratically and in a civilized manner, if not respectfully.
- We must remember as an author has stated:
“When nothing is unsayable, nothing is undoable”.
- It is also important for us to acknowledge and realise that it takes time (years, decades and centuries), to get to where we want to. So giving due importance to our journeying together, there is vast scope for us all to learn. We all do learn indeed. And the more we learn, the more humility takes over us. We begin to discover aspects of people’s identities, cultures and beliefs that we did not know before. Some of these we cannot understand about others. Some of these we fail to make others understand about us.
- That is the positive point to begin with... learning together with a sense of humility in one self and with a sense of respect for and responsibility towards one another.
- More freedom makes society a better one, but we need to be honest in acknowledging that it is not a perfect one. The question to be asked however, is should we be completely free, without consideration, and without responsibilities? Should Katie Hopkins (Columnist of British tabloid The Sun) be free to call people (migrants stuck in boats trying to enter Europe by sea route) ‘cockroaches’? Even the UN condemned her freedom of speech then.
<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/un-slams-katie-hopkins-over-article-calling-migrants-cockroaches-1498747>

What is wrong then if Muslims, for whom the love of their Prophet is more than loving themselves, also condemn anyone trying to ridicule their Prophet’s image? And before this question, there is another question that needs asking. What is it that Danish or French cartoonists and journalists wanted to achieve by drawing the cartoons which is clearly prohibited? Was it for anyone’s benefit? Was it for the good of our world? What are the motives behind such needless insult?



- Recently an editor had to resign because his newspaper wouldn't let him run with the story on HSBC Bank. This proves that we all have lines, which also prompts asking if all journalists get to publish what they want to? Chief Editors' positions are primarily constituted to curtail the freedom of speech by not publishing certain stories which are considered not helpful. There are countless examples. Unfortunately, the media fails to cover all this.
- So the point to be re-emphasized is that we all have lines, but only some lines do become or are made to become more visible than others.
- Another point worth our attention is that *"Words do hurt"*. Let us use them responsibly and for the good of our world. It does not mean we cannot write what may be disliked or what may be found annoying or challenging by some, but in the guise of our rights, freedom and privileges, let us not deliberately seek to insult and ridicule people, people's identities, their dignity and beliefs.
- Freedom of Expression, for some, has now become a duty to attack and insult. But that is not free speech. That's just bad behavior. How and why has it become like that, remains an interesting question to be explored.
- No one is a pure warrior of Freedom of Speech. Let it not become a war on some groups of people. It is not fair.
- It is a matter of privilege that we live in this country where there is freedom of speech. It is however, the limits of free speech, when exercised sensitively, that make us civilized and/or uncivilized. All freedom comes with a degree of responsibility.
- There are somethings indeed that are not really funny, be it the struggles and dignity of people (migrants) stuck in the boat or attempts to draw the Prophet's image. We live in a complicated and complex mixed society. People have the right to critique Muslim female dress codes, but no one has the right to spit at her.
- On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that no one can call for wholesale respect. Nothing is beyond discussion and criticism. If Muslims or for that matter people of any or no faith can critique everything that is there in British society, they must be prepared to be critiqued too. Publishers can and must publish what they want to, as long as it is a critique and a fair critique, not insult. However, publishers must also listen to (and if possible make an effort to understand) who disagrees and why. But death threats to publishers or anyone else are just not acceptable. There is no room for violence, certainly not when it is particularly justified in the name of or for the sake of religion.
- None of us want to have a kind of society where we live in fear of one another. So it is high time that we look at the good and positive stories. Muslims have been part of England from the 16th century and before. In fact, it is said that England's Queen was once so fond of Muslims that the Pope denounced her for being so fond of infidels.
- Mutual recognition, affirmation and acceptance is the only way forward for a successful, safer and stronger Britain.