



Kenan Malik

Free speech in a plural society

Opening address at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals

In the name of "tolerance" and "respect", liberals tend to hold that while free speech is good, speech must necessarily be less free in a plural society. This argument turns the notion of respect on its head, says Kenan Malik. It is precisely because we do live in a plural society that we need the fullest possible extension of free speech. The irony of multiculturalism as a political process is that it undermines much of what is valuable about diversity as lived experience.



What should be the limits of free speech in a plural society?

It is a question that has been asked with increasing urgency over the past few years. Ten years ago, when I last addressed a *Eurozine* conference, the question had a certain academic quality to it, the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* notwithstanding. The events of the past decade — from 9/11 to the riots in France, from the London and Madrid bombings to the fury over the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* — have transformed the debate about multiculturalism and made it all too murderously real. They have also transformed liberal opinion. Twenty years ago most liberals defended Salman Rushdie's right to publish *The Satanic Verses* despite the offence it caused many Muslims. Today, many liberals argue that whatever may appear to be right in principle, in practice one must appease religious and cultural sensibilities because such sensibilities are so deeply felt. As Ian Jack, editor of *Granta* magazine, has said of the pictorial depiction of Mohammed, one must weigh "the individual's right to exhibit or publish one" with "the immeasurable insult [...] that the exercise of such a right would cause". And for liberals such as Jack, the avoidance of cultural pain is, in a multicultural society, more important than what they consider to be the abstract right to freedom of expression.

Part of the problem with this whole debate is that both sides conflate two distinct notions of multiculturalism — multiculturalism as lived experience and multiculturalism as a political process. When most people say that multiculturalism is a good thing, what they mean is the experience of living in a society that is less insular, less homogenous, more vibrant and cosmopolitan than before. In other words, it's a case for cultural diversity, mass immigration, open borders, and open minds.

Those who advocate multiculturalism as a political process are, however, talking about something different. Multiculturalism, they argue, requires public recognition and affirmation of cultural differences. We live in a world, so the argument runs, in which there are deep-seated conflicts between cultures embodying different values, many of which are incommensurate but all of

which are valid in their own context. Social justice requires not just that individuals are treated as political equals, but also that their cultural beliefs are treated as equally valid, and indeed are institutionalised in the public sphere. As the American scholar Iris Young puts it, "Groups cannot be socially equal unless their specific experience, culture, and social contributions are publicly affirmed and recognised."

This conflation of lived experience and political process has proved highly invidious. On the one hand, it has allowed many on the Right — and not just those on the Right — to present the problems of social cohesion as the product of mass immigration and has turned minorities into the problem. On the other hand, it has forced many liberals to abandon traditional notions of freedom and liberty in the name of defending diversity.

I believe it is critical to separate these two notions of multiculturalism. The irony of multiculturalism as a political process is that it undermines much of what is valuable about diversity as lived experience. When we talk about diversity, what we mean is that the world is a messy place, full of clashes and conflicts. That is all for the good, for such clashes and conflicts are the stuff of political and cultural engagement.

The question that liberals very rarely ask themselves is "Why should we value diversity?" Diversity is important, not in and of itself, but because it allows us to expand our horizons, to compare and contrast different values, beliefs, and lifestyles, make judgements upon them, and decide which may be better and which may be worse. It is important, in other words, because it allows us to engage in political dialogue and debate that can help create a more universal language of citizenship.

But it is precisely such dialogue and debate, and the making of such judgements, that multiculturalism as a political process attempts to suppress in the name of "tolerance" and "respect". The very thing that is valuable about diversity — the clashes and conflicts that it brings about — is what many multiculturalists most fear.

This is one of the reasons that so many of the recent flashpoints over multiculturalism have been over the question of free speech. From the Danish cartoons to the pope's speech, the fear is that unfettered free speech generates irresolvable conflicts and therefore needs to be constrained. Liberals have come to accept almost as axiomatic the idea that while free speech is good, speech must necessarily be less free in a plural society. For diverse societies to function and to be fair, we need to show respect for other peoples, cultures, and viewpoints. And we can only do so by being intolerant of people whose views give offence or who transgress firmly entrenched moral boundaries. As the British sociologist Tariq Modood puts it, "If people are to occupy the same political space without conflict, they mutually have to limit the extent to which they subject each others' fundamental beliefs to criticism." One of the ironies of living in a plural society, it seems, is that the preservation of diversity requires us to leave less room for a diversity of views.

I believe the opposite is true. It is precisely because we *do* live in a plural society that we need the fullest extension possible of free speech. In a homogenous society in which everyone thought in exactly the same way, the giving of offence would be nothing more than gratuitous. But in the real world where societies are plural, it is both inevitable and important that people offend the sensibilities of others. Inevitable, because where different beliefs are

deeply held, clashes are unavoidable. And we should deal with those clashes rather than suppress them. Important because any kind of social change or social progress means offending some deeply held sensibilities. The right to "subject each others' fundamental beliefs to criticism" is the bedrock of an open, diverse society. "If liberty means anything", as George Orwell once put it, "it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear".

Ah, comes the response, but should we not also ensure that minorities are not deliberately denigrated? Is it not incumbent on a civilised society to protect the powerless and the vulnerable? Indeed it is. But ask yourself this: who is it that benefits most from censorship? Not the powerless and the vulnerable but rather those that possess both the power to censor and the necessity to do so. It is often said in making the case for censorship that the capacity for free speech is in the hands of just a few — media barons or government ministries. Actually, the opposite is the case. The power to censor is in the hands of the few. But the capacity for free speech is in all our mouths.

It reveals the topsy-turvy nature of the world in which we live that, on the one hand, many liberals can view censorship as progressive and that, on the other, defenders of free speech can view minorities as the greatest obstacle to freedom. Recently I took part in a British television debate about Muslims and free speech. My intention was to defend free speech as the friend, not the enemy, of minorities, including Muslims. But it proved not be so easy because the debate became polarised between those who wanted to defend free speech and saw Muslims as the problem (the final question on which the audience had to vote was "Are Muslims a threat to free speech?"), and those who wanted to defend Muslim rights and saw free speech as the problem.

Many of the recent clashes over free speech have certainly been fuelled by Muslim anger. But the idea that Muslims provide the principal threat to free speech is preposterous — especially in a country like Britain whose libel laws have an almost medieval flavour about them and where liberties are continually being eroded in the name of the so-called war on terror.

Muslims have certainly taken advantage of the culture of censorship — and the aversion to giving offence — that is now deeply rooted in most Western societies. But it is absurd to imagine that they have created this culture. Equally absurd is the claim that such a culture benefits Muslims. Insofar as the culture of censorship benefits Muslims, it benefits not Muslims in general, but those within Muslim communities who possess power and do not wish to see it challenged. The real impact of censorship is to undermine progressive movements within minority communities.

Take the controversy over the Danish cartoons. There has been a general assumption that all Muslims were offended by the cartoons and that all Muslims wished to ban them. That is not true. Bünyamin Simsek is a Muslim councillor in the Danish city of Aarhus who helped organize a counter-demonstration to the cartoon protests. "There is", he says, "a large group of Muslims in this city who want to live in a secular society and adhere to the principle that religion is an issue between them and God and not something that should involve society." He is not alone. But such voices get silenced in the rush to censor that which is deemed to cause offence.

Multiculturalist censors are helping to strengthen the hand of the most conservative elements and to undermine those who want to challenge tradition and authority. That is why groups such as Southall Black Sisters — an

organisation of Asian women activists that for more than 20 years has been combating both racism and discrimination against women — strenuously oppose the idea that the giving of offence should be forbidden. As Rahila Gupta of Southall Black Sisters put it in response to British government plans to make it an offence to incite "religious hatred", such censorship "will strengthen the voices of religious intolerance and choke off women's right to dissent". And this, she observed "is too high a price to pay to appease an alienated community".

The notion of giving offence suggests that certain beliefs are so important or valuable to certain people that they should be put beyond the possibility of being insulted, or caricatured, or even questioned. The importance of the principle of free speech is precisely that it provides a permanent challenge to the idea that some questions are beyond contention, and hence acts as a permanent challenge to authority. This is why free speech is essential not simply to the practice of democracy, but to the aspirations of those groups who may have been failed by the formal democratic processes. The real value of free speech, in other words, is not to those who possess power, but to those who want to challenge them. And the real value of censorship is to those who do not wish their authority to be challenged.

Of course, many of those who give offence are not progressive at all, but bigots — racists or homophobes. But people must be as free to offend against liberal orthodoxies as against reactionary ones. Free speech for everyone except bigots is not free speech at all. The right to free speech only has political bite when we are forced to defend the rights of people whose views we despise.

In any case, you cannot challenge bigoted ideas by banning them. You simply let the sentiments fester underground. As Milton once memorably put it, "To keep out evil doctrine by licensing is like the exploit of that gallant man who sought to keep out crows by shutting his park gate." Censoring ugly ideas will not make them go away. It is simply a means of abrogating our responsibility for dealing with them. It is only through freedom of expression that we can articulate our disagreements with such people and challenge their ideas.

Free speech does not mean accepting all views. It means having all views in the open so we can challenge the ones we find unconscionable. Today, though, we do the exact opposite: there are certain views we ban because they are deemed too unpalatable. But there are other views we are too frightened of challenging because we don't want to give offence to diverse cultures.

But you've got us all wrong, say the censors. We're not out to censor. All we want to do is ensure respect for all beliefs and cultures. It is an argument that turns the notion of respect on its head.

In its traditional Kantian sense, respect requires us to treat every human being equally as a moral, autonomous being. Every individual possesses the capacity to express political and moral views and to act upon them. And every individual is responsible for their views and actions and is capable of being judged by them. The importance of free speech is that it is an expression of individual moral autonomy, the capacity of people to engage in a robust debate about their beliefs and their actions — and to bear the consequences.

The multiculturalist censor demands respect not just for the person but also for his or her beliefs. And in so doing they undermine individual autonomy, both

by constraining the right of people to criticise others' beliefs and by insisting that individuals who hold those beliefs are too weak or vulnerable to stand up to criticism, satire, or abuse.

Far from according respect, the multiculturalist censor treats people not as autonomous beings but as incapable victims needing special protection. The result is an auction of victimhood as every group attempts to outbid all others as the one feeling most offended. What we end up with is a pick 'n' mix attitude to what is tolerable. Earlier this year British Muslim leader Iqbal Sacranie made some derogatory comments about homosexuals. Ludicrously it led to a police investigation. In response, 22 Muslim leaders wrote to the *Times* newspaper demanding the right to be able to "freely express their views in an atmosphere free of intimidation or bullying". Those same leaders deny such a right to newspapers publishing cartoons about Mohammed. Many of those happy to see cartoons lampooning Mohammed draw the line at anything mocking the Holocaust. Gay rights groups want Muslims (and black raga artists) to be prosecuted for homophobia but want the right to criticise Muslims as they see fit. It is fast becoming a case of "My speech should be free, but yours is too costly".

We can see here that the argument against free speech is really an argument in defence of particular sectional interests. And that is the best reason for rejecting restraints on speech. We can build a plural society in which free speech provides the means of engagement and dialogue between different parts of society. Or a sectional society in which restrictions on free speech help police the fragments. The choice is ours.



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