

A letter to offended Swedish Muslims

Tuesday 18 September 2007, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 17 August 2007).

The piece below was written for *Weekly International* (Stockholm) re Muhammad's tasteless cartoons. A guy hardly known for his paintings who wanted some attention (he almost confessed it in a TV interview) who painted Muhammad as dog and sent these 'paintings' to an exhibition in a small town in southern Sweden. South of Sweden (bordering Denmark), of late, is witnessing an increase in Nazis popularity. His paintings were refused by the organisers of the exhibition. It became a TV news but then media imposed (I must add pretty responsibly) self-censorship. mainstream media kept silent unless *Nerikes Allehanda* (a paper many in Sweden heard of first time in their lives) from a small small town called Orebro published it. Mainstream papers and channels still refused to reproduce the stuff. A good and wise gesture, in my view.

Unlike their Danish counterparts, Swedish rightwing government people behaved bit wise and took a reasonable stand: taking distance from the published stuff but upholding the commitment to press freedom. However, extreme right seized the opportunity to blacken and demonise Muslims and invoke the 'culture war'. Ordinary Swedish people however remained kind of indifferent. I think opinion was pretty divided.

Farooq Sulehria

Asslamo Alaikum,

A Pakistani-Swedish friend of mine, the other day, gave me ring urging me to join a demo against the publications of Prophet Muhammad's cartoon in *Nerikes Allehanda*. I simply refused. Not because I am one of those using "freedom of the press" as a Trojan donkey. Neither because I am an atheist and could not feel the 'pain' believers like you go through whenever a blasphemy is committed.

I, in the first place, refused to join your anti-*Nerikes Allehanda* demo merely because I have never agitated either on a religious issue or on a religious platform.

But I also refused because I found your protest very absurd. By the way, isn't it absurd that you people get so furious when Islam is offended by the publication of tasteless caricatures. However, when Bush dispatches his troops to kill Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, not a single protest is registered by Muslims across Sweden. The historic march organised by anti-war movement on February 15 in Stockholm (biggest since Vietnam days) was joined by 40,000 'infidel' Swedes who wanted to stop killing of Iraqi Muslims. But you people stayed home, most likely enjoying some curry or kebab. Neither have I seen you people at the anti-war marches held every year in March to mark the anniversary of US occupation of Iraq. The only Muslims I happen to see on these demonstrations are communists and atheists often disowned by you people. Similarly, I have never seen you people joining demonstrations in support of Palestinians daily killed by Zionist state machine called Israel. I

did not see any Muslim response to Abu Gharaib or Gitmo Gulags either.

By the way, it is not just you Muslims in Sweden who have been crying Jihad on desecration of Islam but staying quite on sacrilege of Muslims. The Danish Imam who spent months campaigning and rousing Muslim world on *Jyllands-Posten's* cartoons, did not board any flight to Muslim world when Danish troops were dispatched to butcher Iraqis on behalf of Uncle Sam. Remember in 2005, Afghans setting their own towns (or whatever is left of them) on fire after a US marine in Guantánamo had urinated on the Qur'an. But desecration of their whole country through US occupation remains acceptable.

Let me narrate a very personal experience. In October 2005, a deadly quake shook parts of my ancestral country Kashmir controlled by Pakistan. A week after this tragedy, that claimed 80 thousand lives, Sweden sold Saab planes worth a billion dollar. This was exactly the amount experts in Pakistan were talking about for the reconstruction of quake-hit Kashmir. In my weekly column for a Pakistani daily, I strongly protested against this arms deal. The secular PPP took this issue up and agitated in the parliament. The bearded Muslims in parliament remained silent. And not a single imam in Swedish mosques protested against the deal that enriched Sweden but would starve hundreds of thousands in Pakistan and Kashmir to death.

It did not owe merely to this absurdity that I distanced myself from your anti-*Nerikes Allehanda* demonstration. I also stayed away because I find such shows of Muslim outrages as kind of hypocritical.

Isn't it hypocritical that we want respect in Europe but are not ready to concede the same rights to our minorities in Muslim countries. The Indian Muslims insist on slaughtering cow. Egyptian Muslims attacking Coptic quarters in Cairo is no news. Attack on churches in Pakistan, of late, has become a routine. Taliban besides destroying Afghan future, also destroyed Afghan past too when they pulled down Buddha statues. Did we protest at Sergeltorget?

Let me narrate an excellent example, from my ancestral country Jammu and Kashmir, how tolerance and respect for other religions help gain respect. Muslims comprise a majority in Jammu and Kashmir. To show respect to their Hindu brethren, they do not slaughter cow. In turn, Hindu pundits (who unlike Brahmins in India and elsewhere are not vegetarians) stay away from pork. While in India, Hindus and Muslims have been at each other's throat many times; the communal harmony in Kashmir has been, in general, exemplary.

I do not mean that a Christ-like or Gandhian-pacifism of offering the other cheek would help cease the 'cultural wars' or 'clash of civilisation' on offer now a days. From *Jyllands Posten* to *Nerikes Allehanda*, the western 'freedom of expression' fundamentalists have on purpose been publishing stuff that insults Muslims. While Islamophobia is becoming a handy tool to push a right-wing agenda, 'freedom of expression' is used as a Trojan horse to paint Muslims as different, alien and morally incompatible with Western values.

Freedom of expression, in my humble opinion, is primarily involved in cases when writers or artists defy the prohibitions of their own governments or religions — prohibitions which often take the form of blasphemy laws. Writings or cartoons by members of dominant communities vilifying the religion of minority groups that are targets of racism are just a manifestation of oppression and incitation to racial hatred.

But fighting this oppression does not require mindless violence. Do you know, only last year three people were killed in Lahore (Pakistan) while 'protesting' against *Jylland Posten* while historical monuments were set on fire. I am afraid; couple of more provocative *Jylland Posten* publications

would have reduced whole of Lahore to ashes. Similarly, half a dozen youth fell to police bullets in Pakistani capital Islamabad when rage drove the faithful mad on Salman Rushdie's 'blasphemous' novel (hardly read by faithful Muslim).

Paradoxically, it is Salman Rushdie who set a good example when provocations are instigated. A Pakistani film, *International Gorillay*, portraying Salman Rushdie 'as a torturer, murderer and drunkard wearing an appalling variety of technicoloured safari suits' was refused a certificate in Britain. Rushdie saw a video of the film and found it awful. The film ended with his execution by the power of Allah almighty. Still, Salman Rushdie wrote to the British Board of Film Classification promising them that he would not take any legal action against them or the film. He urged the board to license the film. In his own words: 'The film was unbanned and promptly vanished from the sight. An attempt to screen it in Bradford was greeted by rows of empty seats. It was a perfect illustration of the argument for free speech: people really can make up their own minds'.

I know you people have excommunicated Salman Rushdie. He is an outcast. But if he has not a point to make when he says that let people make up their mind. Imagine Nerikes Allehandan provocation has been given a damn. I promise the piece of shit published in the name of art, by now, would have reached the place it rightfully deserves: dustbin.

Hoping that you will find time to read these lines and reflect upon them, I expect you to see you in your hundreds on September 18 demo being staged to mark right-wing Swedish government's first year in power.

Feeamanallah,

Farooq Sulehria
