



| 50.50

Freedom of expression: a sacred right

There is a disconnect between the teachings of the Qur'an and much of the Muslim population's understanding of the Qur'an. How do we address and resolve this issue?

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I was interviewed by Charlie Hebdo in an issue published in October 2012 in a section of their magazine that deals with serious issues. As expected, the cover of that issue was adorned with a provocative cartoon, but regardless, I supported their right to express themselves freely.

What is, however, offensive is the silencing of expression through murder, arbitrary detention and torture in the guise of Islam as 'blasphemy'.

The assault on one's freedom to express has been a struggle in Muslim communities for centuries and it continues to carry on as we have witnessed through the murdering of staff members of Charlie Hebdo on January 7th; through the charges of deviant teachings under the Sedition Act in Malaysia for expressing a progressive understanding of Islam; and through the 10 year jail term and punishment of 1000 lashes that Raif Badawi received in Saudi Arabia for simply setting up a Liberal Muslim Network. The flogging of Raif Badawi began today, and just to make sure it is oozing with religiosity, they will execute the punishment after Friday prayers outside Masjid al-Jafari in Jeddah, where the congregation is invited to witness this brutality.

There is a disconnect between the teachings of the Qur'an and much of the Muslim population's understanding of the Qur'an.

For example, Prophet Muhammad was often insulted during his lifetime. While kids often threw rocks at him, and his followers were tortured, starved and murdered. In spite of being mocked and humiliated, he did not avenge the Meccans upon his return to Mecca, nor force them to convert to Islam, but merely told them to 'go on your way'. In fact, in a well-known narration, there was a woman in Mecca who would dump refuse at Prophet Muhammad's door, lay thorns in his path and even poured dung on his head while Muhammad was praying. He never responded with anger or violence. To the contrary, when he noticed the absence of this woman's insults, he visited her home to find that she was sick and wished her well.

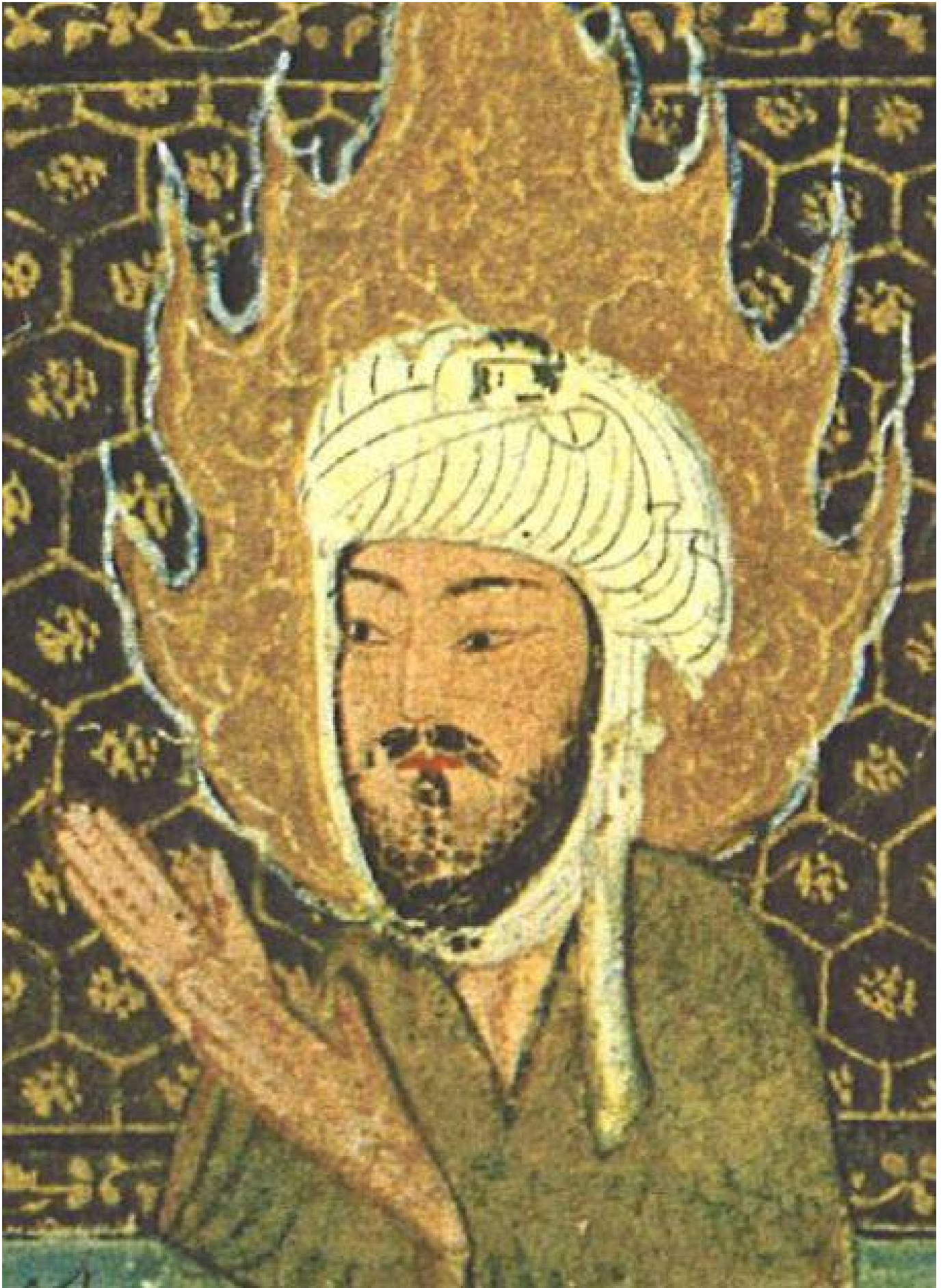


Image of Prophet Muhammad from a 14th Century Persian manuscript Given this narrative of the Prophet and the many Qur'anic teachings for compassion and patience, the killing of fellow humans supposedly in the defense of Prophet Muhammad and Islam is simply vile. Where did the teachings and practice diverge, how do we address the polarization of extremes in the Western societies and how do we resolve these issues? Here are some suggestions:

The media:

Given that freedom of expression is paramount, it is regrettable that the voices of progressive Muslims are often silenced by the media. More often than not, the media, including the liberal media, gives too much space to radical Muslims and to ex-Muslims, while moderate Muslims are left voiceless. The media is partly to blame for the polarization of our societies by leaving out voices that promote peaceful co-existence. That void confronts many Muslims daily who are cornered with the question "where are the progressive/moderate Muslims?". That void fuels fear and anti-Islam/Muslim sentiments, which further alienate Muslims in the middle, especially the Muslim youth who are already discriminated against for not being 'European or Western enough'.

The media is quick to label violent perpetrators as Muslim terrorists if they happen to be Muslim, but simply refer to mental-health issues when these violent perpetrators are non-Muslims. The media reports terrorism in the name of Islam, but does not report or highlight just as importantly the Muslim policeman who was executed for guarding Charlie Hebdo's office, or the Muslim, or the imam or the community leader who called the police to report a potential terrorist activity. And in the Muslim world, murders of Muslims by Muslim radicals is unfortunately a part of life.

To help tackle the divergence of Qur'anic teachings and practise the media should include Muslims with an inclusive worldview to counter balance the radical activities being reported, and the opinions of representatives from established conservative organizations.

Governments:

Should support progressive Muslim voices and the positions we take against our radical right. As we have seen, the Muslim radical right is just as destructive to a cohesive society as the extreme right wing folks in Europe and the rest of the Western states.

Scrutinize Islamic school curricula that promote misogynistic interpretations of Islam, homophobia, the concept of Islamic superiority with everyone else being sub-human, the promotion of a Caliphate, the overarching theology of intolerance that not only runs contrary to the core of Qur'anic teachings but also contrary to your own constitutions and the fundamental principles of justice and equality for all.

The European governments should include Muslims with an inclusive worldview on panels and on advisory boards at all levels of governments. If you can not find them, we at Muslims for Progressive Values will help you find them!

The people around the world:

It would be helpful if more of the non-Muslim population would support progressive Muslim voices instead of attacking us for not being Muslim enough, or for quoting sermons of radical Imams as truth bearers, and that we progressive Muslims are the trojan horses.

To the Muslim population:

No, we do not need to apologize for the heinous crimes of fellow "Muslims", but we have to once and for all do away with the theology that has bastardized Qur'anic teachings into an Islam that is unrecognizable. We should no longer be tolerant of the intolerance. We should purge the corruption of Islam by Wahhabism, peddled by Saudi Arabia in every corner of the world with its petro-dollars, bribing Imams with money and lavish mosques, bribing Muslim-majority countries with pilgrimage visas to Mecca for their citizens through negotiated quotas, seducing the poor with food, and yes, the provision of free indoctrinated religious classes and books. We should cleanse Islam from a false belief that women are incapable of making decisions or leading prayer or government, that they need a 'guardian' who in actuality behaves more like

an oppressor, that music and the arts is forbidden, and that the right to believe or not to believe is 'haram'.

That, is the description of blasphemy. It is the promoters and teachers of Wahhabism who are the true blasphemers.

*Read more interviews and analysis with people of Muslim heritage working to challenge fundamentalisms in 50.50's series: **Frontline Voices Against Muslim Fundamentalism***

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