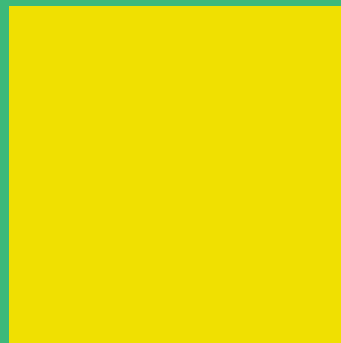


6



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION:
PROFANE OF SACRED?

MODULE SIX

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: PROFANE OF SACRED

6.1 INTRODUCTION VIDEO CLIP



Figure 6.1
Video Clip

Ahmed and Pieter-Jan are confronted on the playground with a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed. Ahmed felt hurt and thinks that this is not acceptable. Pieter-Jan also thinks that more respect should be shown. Bully, the student who showed the cartoon believes that anyone and anything can be laughed at. Muslims should also tolerate this according to him.

Afterwards Ahmed told his father at home what happened at school. His father became furious, but Fatima Ahmed's mother tried to calm him down. She indicated that the Prophet was also in a similar situation of being scolded but he never responded with violence.

Pieter-Jan and Ahmed then went searching on the Internet for answers to their question, specifically how it is that Islam is mocked under the guise of freedom of expression. Moussa Karim talked to them and explained how to deal with this phenomenon from an Islamic perspective.

Finally, Pieter-Jan and Ahmed told the class who the prophet was and how he dealt with being ridiculed. The teacher then thanked Ahmed and invited everyone to be more.

6.2 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

6.2.1 INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression means that every individual has the right to express his beliefs both religiously, philosophically, politically, as well as personally.

Expression can occur in a variety of ways both through word, writing and actions:

- a) Word: such as through education or media
- b) Writing: Press or petition
- c) Acts: Worship services, meetings and associations



Figure 6.2
Source: © Trifonenko
Ivan / Adobe Stock

These freedoms are explicitly protected by democratic constitutional states, for example in Article 19 of the Belgian Constitution as well as in Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In concrete terms, this means that every individual can express his beliefs without fear of persecution.

Every individual therefore has the right to practice his beliefs. For example, a Muslim can freely practice his beliefs in words, writing and actions. He can found schools, publish a weekly newspaper and build mosques. In Belgium, the community is eligible for recognition, provided it meets certain conditions, and can therefore be subsidized.

Freedom of speech and writing also means that everyone is free to say and write whatever they want without fear of prosecution, therefore censorship is out of the question. Especially in press and cartoonist circles, “self-censorship” is unacceptable.

Indeed, freedom of the press means that journalists are not kept within bounds. The danger is that important information will be withheld from the public.

Consequently, the question that this subject undoubtedly raises is, “Is freedom of speech absolute?” We will discuss this in detail in the next subchapter.

6.2.2 IS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ABSOLUTE?

For a time, wars were waged to claim the right to freedom of expression. They succeeded and this right was then enshrined into rules and laws that guarantee our freedom of expression.

Yet it is not always possible to say or write everything at will. Incitement to racism, xenophobia, defamation or insulting speech, hatred or violence are punishable by law.

The question is whether insulting the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) falls under freedom of speech. Or should this also be punishable?



Figure 6.3
Source: © Siam /
Adobe Stock

As mentioned earlier, freedom of speech is a common good. Therefore, minorities can openly and freely practice their beliefs. If the majority can decide for themselves to whom freedoms are or are not granted, then this is an undermining of free democratic society.

Through legislation, people tried to organize society in such a way that the weak would be protected from (the abuse of power by) the strong.

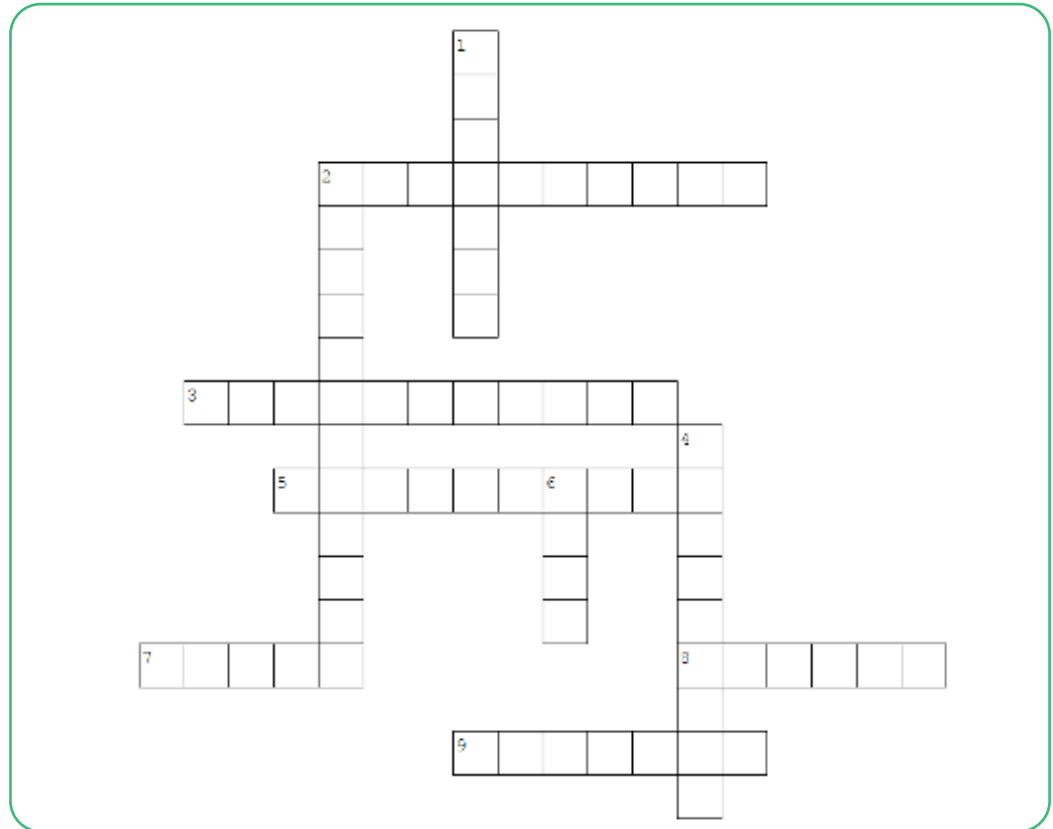
The French preacher and activist Henri Lacordaire says: "Entre le fort et le faible, entre le riche et le pauvre, entre le maître et le serviteur, c'est la liberté qui opprime et la loi qui affranchit." ("Between the strong and the weak, between the rich and the poor, between the master and the servant, it is freedom that oppresses and law that sets free").

Mocking the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is undoubtedly hurtful to Muslims. However, if Muslims demand that it be banned by law because it comes across as hurtful, then they should be consistent in doing so. Suppose a citizen demands that the Quran should be banned by law because it contains passages that are offensive or because he/she believes it incites violence. Imagine that every time someone is offended by statements, pictures,... of his fellow citizen, he can sue him. Then we would end up on an endless street that leads to absurdities.

But that same freedom of speech means that the Muslim can morally disapprove of those same cartoons and has the right to feel offended. Citizens have the right to freedom. But those who exercise that right may also prepare for a non-violent rebuttal. In other words, you may disapprove matters that are legally permissible within the framework of freedom of expression.

This freedom is enshrined in the laws of democratic constitutional states as well as in the European Convention on Human Rights and has provided the foundation for peace that has been fought for over time.

Exercise 1: Complete the crossword puzzle



Horizontal

2. Check for prohibited items in publications or films and omit them
3. With this, the society protects the weak from the rich
5. It is ... to incite racism, xenophobia and insults
7. The holy book of the Muslims
8. The view that one human race is better than another
9. Another word for ceremony in a religious context

Vertical

1. This a community can receive from the government when it meets certain conditions
2. Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Belgian ...
4. A type of government over a country in which the inhabitants have a great deal of say
6. In addition to word and writing, you can express your opinion in this way

Exercise 2: Answer the following questions.

1. How is freedom of expression defined in the Belgian Constitution?

2. In what ways can a believer practice his right to hold his own beliefs?

3. Has the right to free speech always existed?

4. What is the main purpose of the European Convention on Human Rights?

5. Can a Muslim demand by law that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) not be insulted?

6.3 WHO WAS THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH)?

6.3.1 BIRTH OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH)

Muhammad was born in the Year of the Elephant which corresponds to the year 570 of the Gregorian calendar. He was born into a noble family in Mecca, the Banu Hashim clan which was held in high esteem by the other tribes in Mecca and surrounding areas. Even before his birth, Muhammad had lost his father and therefore from the beginning he was given the double status which, for the people of Mecca, constituted the prestige of the descendant and the frailty of a fatherless child. At that time, the name “Muhammad” was completely unknown in the Arabian Peninsula. His mother had received this name through a vision during her pregnancy. In it, the birth of the *‘lord of this people’* was also announced. During the birth she was instructed to say, *“I place him under the protection of the One and Only from the falsity of all envious people.”* The Quraish, the tribe that included the Banu Hashim, had a special relationship with the nomadic lifestyle of the Arab Bedouins. They entrusted their boys to the care of Bedouin foster families. They believed that the Bedouins lived a freer, healthier and nobler lifestyle than those who lived in the city. To have a successful life in the desert required a high level of solidarity and consequently a high level of respect for one’s personality and appreciation of human value.



Figure 6.4
Source: © meen_na /
Adobe Stock

Halimah bint Abi Dhu’ayb and her husband Harith ibn ‘Abd al’Uzzah of the Hawazin tribe came to Mecca in search of an infant to take to the desert. They were the poorest of their clan and could not convince any family of the Quraish to entrust them with the care of their child. Aminah, Muhammad’s mother, was also in a desperate situation and could not find a Bedouin foster family to care for Muhammad because he was fatherless. Halimah realized that a young widow like Aminah could not afford her services. Nevertheless, she agreed to take Muhammad with her because she did not want to return to her people empty-handed. Even though it would not bring her any material gain, Halimah thought their generosity might bring them other blessings. Her decision indeed brought good changes to their lives because Muhammad’s presence brought a lot of blessings to their household. Halimah and Harith raised Muhammad as their own son and returned to Mecca regularly to show Aminah his progression.

One day Halimah returned to Mecca to tell Aminah about an incident that Muhammad had experienced. Halimah’s son had seen the incident and came to tell her about it. Two men in white garments came up to Muhammad with a golden basin full of snow. They took hold of him and opened his chest, took out his heart and opened it. They took out a black clot and threw it away.

Then they washed his heart and body with snow until they made him clean. Troubled by this event, Halimah brought Muhammad back to his mother. Aminah was not surprised by this incident and told them that she herself had witnessed signs that her child was being prepared for a special fate.

6.3.2 THE CHILDHOOD OF THE PROPHET (PBUH)

The fact that Muhammad was both orphaned and poor caused him to experience vulnerability and humility first hand when he was very young. After that he loses his mother on the young age of 6, it brings him almost directly under the care of God but at the same time very close to people who have nothing at all. The Qur'an reminds him not to forget this throughout his life and especially during his prophetic mission.

Your past is a school of learning from which you can gain practical and concrete knowledge. Also, the time he spent with the nomads in the desert has given him certain experiences that will guide his life later. The first years of the Prophet's life are the breeding ground for a very special relationship with nature that will play a constant role throughout his mission. Thus, the Prophet had an important relationship with nature from an early age. Living close to nature, observing, understanding and respecting it is necessary for a deep faith. The universe is full of signs that remind us of the presence of the Creator and the desert opens the human mind for observation, meditation and initiation. The first years of Muhammad's life were undoubtedly years of preparation in which his gaze was directed to the signs of the universe.



Figure 6.5
Source: © Michael /
Adobe Stock

6.3.4.EXERCISES

Exercise 3: Match the following columns and write down the answer below.

1. Year in which the Prophet was born.	A. 6 years
2. Clan from which the Prophet came	B. Abu Talib
3. Foster mother of the Prophet	C. Banu Hashim
4. How old was the Prophet when his mother died	D. His heart
5. This person took care of the Prophet after his grandfather died	E. Halimah bint Abi Dhu'ayb
6. Which part of the Prophet's body was washed by angels when he was only 4 years old	F. Yathrib
7. The ancient name of the city of Medina	G. His mother Aminah
8. Who gave the Prophet the name Muhammad?	H. Year of the Elephant (570 A.D.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Exercise 4: Answer the questions below.

1. What was the wisdom behind the Prophet experiencing what it is like to be a poor orphan at a young age?

2. Why were newborn children raised in the countryside?

3. What role did nature play in preparing the Prophet's task as messenger?

4. What was the wisdom behind the story where the Prophet's heart was cleansed?

5. What influence did the Prophet have on the household of Halimah?

6.4 TRIALS, HUMILIATION AND MOCKERY OF THE PROPHET

6.4.1 REVELATION AND RESISTANCE

When the Prophet Muhammad received the revelation and began to proclaim it publicly, he encountered resistance from the chiefs of Mecca. Every day they became more aware of the danger lurking: it was, in their opinion, a rebellion against their gods and their customs. This could eventually endanger their power.



Figure 6.6

Source: © Erica Guilane-Nachez / Adobe Stock

The tribal leaders first tried to convince Muhammad to stop the proclamation of his message. For this purpose they sent his uncle Abu Talib but this did not bring any results and the Prophet persisted and said, *"O my uncle, I swear by God that even if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand to dissuade me from this matter, I will not let them discourage me from this matter until He (Allah) has brought it to a successful conclusion or I die!"*

Because the Prophet persisted, his opponents began a campaign of slander against him in which hostilities broke out against him: the Prophet (pbuh) was insulted and called a sorcerer and insane. Abu Lahab had his two sons who had married the daughters of the Prophet separated from them. And Abu Lahab's wife scattered her garbage cans whenever the Prophet walked by. She told the people that Muhammad was possessed by the devil and that he broke up families and promoted chaos and debauchery. In none of these cases did the Prophet (pbuh) respond to these insinuations with violence.

When people outside Mecca came to Mecca to listen to Muhammad's message they were warned against the Prophet's so called misdeeds. The Prophet also faced humiliation and ridicule. But the Prophet (pbuh) never used violence in response.

The pressure grew and the opposition manifested itself more and more violently: the tribal leaders were particularly targeting the weaker Muslims. For example, Bilal, who was then a slave, was tortured by his master. Later Abu Bakr bought him and immediately gave him back his freedom.

One day, the Prophet was humiliated by Abu Djahl so harshly that even the non-Muslims considered that he had transgressed the limits of decency. The situation became increasingly difficult for the Muslims and especially

for the most vulnerable among them but the Prophet remained steadfast and he answered every attack with wisdom and not with violence.

6.4.2 THE HUMILIATION OF THE PROPHET (PBUH) IN TA'IF

The humiliations and persecutions were getting worse and worse. Therefore, the Prophet decided to go to the city of Ta'if in the hope that the leaders of the city would heed his message and protect him from his enemies.

He was not received as he wished and the leaders mocked him. They not only refused to comply with his request but also turned the population against him. Upon his departure, insults rained down and children threw stones at him resulting in bloody injuries.

He was unable to find support among his fellow men and took refuge in an orchard to get rid of his assailants. There he turned to Allah and prayed to Him, *"O God, to You alone I complain of my weakness, my impotence and my insignificance in relation to men. O most Merciful among the merciful, You are the Lord of the weak and You are my Lord. To whose hands do You entrust me? To some distant stranger who will treat me badly? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me? As long as You are not angry with me, I know no fear. Your gracious support, however, would open for me a wider road and a vaster horizon! I take refuge in the light of Your countenance, with which all darkness is illumined and things in this world and the other are put right, so that You do not cause Your wrath to descend upon me and I am not touched by Your wrath. Yet to You belongs the right to rebuke, as long as You are not satisfied. There is no power beyond You."*

At the moment when there seemed to be no way out, he turned to God for spiritual revival and mental strengthening.

All in all, we have noticed that in no case did Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) seeked refuge in violence. He was mocked, humiliated, insulted and even physically attacked. The Prophet (pbuh) always resisted these insults and mockeries with wisdom.

6.4.3 EXERCISES

Exercise 5: Insight questions. Answer the questions below.

1. Give five examples of how the Quraish fought the Prophet.

2. What was the reason the Prophet went to Ta'if?

3. What lessons can you draw from the supplication the Prophet made after he was expelled from Ta'if?

4a. How would you react if you had experienced the same thing as the Prophet (both in Ta'if and Mecca)?

4b. What can you learn from the way the Prophet responded to the various confrontations?

6.5 GLOSSARY

Freedom of expression: Means that every individual has the right to express his beliefs both in terms of faith, philosophical, political, as well as personal.

Self-censorship: Is a version of censorship in which media or individuals impose publication restrictions on themselves. This is done, for example, to spare feelings of their audience or to avoid problems with the government.

Xenophobia: is the fear or hatred of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange.

Rebuttal: a statement that a claim or criticism is not true.

Nomads: people who travel from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals and have no permanent home.

Slander: a false spoken statement about someone that damages their reputation.

Debauchery: behavior considered to be excessively decadent, indulgent, and depraved.

6.6 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

We see Ahmed and Pieter-Jan walking on the playground while a bully calls out to Ahmed:

Bully: ah look there you have one of those Muslims. I hope he hasn't seen the new cartoon of the week in Minmaxed magazine yet.... he'll explode...

Ahmed: Huh? Sigh... What are you talking about now?

Bully hands Ahmed the magazine.

Bully: Here you go! (laughs mockingly)

Pieter-Jan jumps in and grabs the magazine and looks at the cartoon.

Pieter-Jan: WOW, sorry but this is unacceptable. I'm not even Muslim but this is just mocking their religion.

Bully: Yeah yeah sure.... it's just a cartoon man.... Muslims need to learn to accept self-mockery for once. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right, here in the West and we are not going to deviate from that. That's what our ancestors fought for.

Ahmed casts a glance at the magazine and is disgusted....

Ahmed: (saddened) Why is it always about my religion. If it was any other group you wouldn't be so insensitive. But because we are Muslims it is okay to insult us. Two weights and two measures. Islam, Islam, Islam... and it's always negative.

Bully: boo hoo hoo.... Go cry to your mother about it.... I'm out of here.

We see the bully leave

Ahmed goes home and tells about the cartoons that were shown. Father Harun reacts very

angrily. He doesn't understand why the prophet Mohammed is brought in. He is offended. Mother Fatima calls for peace. Uncle Samir, who is also present, calls for dialogue.

Ahmed: Dad, a kid at school showed me cartoons today. Guess what those cartoons were about.... indeed, the Prophet Muhammad.

Father: Our Holy Prophet. Surely that can't be true. They are doing this to bully us. This makes me so angry. How hard it is to respect others. When they attack the Prophet, it's like they're attacking me personally.

Mother: Calm down, calm down. You shouldn't get so excited. It's not good for your heart. Maybe we should put everything in perspective. I think our prophet Muhammad was a strong person. He was insulted, scolded and humiliated and even then, he was the bigger person.

Ahmed: Is that so? I just don't see why freedom of speech is a good thing if it only serves to bully the Islam community....

Later, Ahmed is surfing the computer while in videocall with Pieter-Jan.

Ahmed: I can't imagine that 'Freedom of Speech' is just an excuse to insult others....

Pieter-Jan: Yes, of course it's not... Just look at this website: It says that the idea of freedom of speech is to make sure that even unpopular opinions can be heard in order to move society as a whole forward.

Ahmed: Yes I can understand that. But why do people always use this as an excuse to ridicule Islam?

Pieter-Jan: Maybe this man can give you an answer to that question.

Pieter-Jan sends a link to a blog by an Arab reporter named Mousa Karim.

Ahmed opens the web page and goes back to Pieter-Jan:

Ahmed: Look it seems he also has an opinion page on freedom of speech.

Ahmed clicks on the link and a pop-up appears.

'Mousa Karim has just gone offline. If you want to contact him, please wait a moment'

Ahmed: I hate these pop-ups.... Where can I close this.

He looks for a cross to close the pop-up. We see a countdown begin.

Computer: Contact Mousa Karim in 5...4....3...

Ahmed: no I don't want to contact him!

Pieter-Jan: quickly... close it then!

Computer: 2 ... 1.... Calling....

We hear a sound of a call being started...

Mousa Karim appears on the screen.

Mousa (surprised): Well, hello young friends. How are you today? What can I do for you?

Ahmed: Oh, I'm sorry to disturb you. It was a mistake.

Mousa: Oh I don't think so.... Why did you visit my website?

Pieter-Jan: We were looking on the internet why freedom of speech is used as an excuse to ridicule Muslims... My friend Ahmed here was confronted with some Mohammed Cartoons earlier today....

Ahmed: yes... sigh....

Mousa: Ah I see, and how did that make you feel?

Ahmed: It felt very bad... I just don't understand why it's always us who are targeted....

Mousa: I'm going to tell you a story. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was also ridiculed. And those who converted to Islam were persecuted and tortured.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) met with the chiefs of the most important tribe in Ta'if. The Thaqeef tribe. He told them about Islam, but they rejected his message. The Thaqeef tribe insulted him. They released the children to throw stones at him. As he bled and the people laughed at him, he fled and found shelter in an empty orchard. And he never used violence.

He returned to his God and pleaded the following: "To You, my Lord, I complain of my weakness, my lack of support, and the humiliation inflicted on me. Most merciful and gracious, You are the Lord of the weak and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me?"

Ahmed: I cannot imagine how he must have felt.

Mousa: He was alone, bleeding, and rejected by other people. The Prophet was resting on a rock. He was praying to Allah. He was so compassionate and merciful. He did not ask Allah to punish the people of Ta'if or take revenge on them.

Ahmed: Wow...so intense. How did Prophet Muhammad respond to those who insulted and attacked him?

Mousa: He chose mercy and not violence towards them. He was not overcome by hatred or revenge. He said to the angel Jibreel, "I prefer that Allah should beget from their progeny people who will worship Allah the One and will not ascribe to Him any partners."

This means that he also found a way to deal with these feelings. Tell people how you feel. Engage in a dialogue with them. That is the only way you can understand each other.

Ahmed: *pff what a headache. I don't know how to deal with this.*

Mousa: *Maybe you should talk about it in class with your classmates. That way they can support you. There will always be bullies in this world, but try to ignore them. Most people are willing to listen to your feelings and show empathy. At least that's my experience....*

Ahmed: *Thank you, Mousa.*

We see Ahmed and Pieter Jan standing in front of the class.

Ahmed: *When the Prophet (pbuh) himself was mocked, insulted and even molested, he responded by saying, "O Allah, forgive my people, for indeed they know not what they do."*

And after his entourage encouraged him to curse his opponents, he said, "I have not been sent as a curse, but as a mercy."

Furthermore, we also read in the Qur'an that Allah spoke to His Prophet (pbuh) and said, "And be patient with what they say about you. And turn away from them appropriately."

The Prophet stood up for the weak. He fought injustice. He was reasonable and always respected others. That is what the prophet means to me. So yes that's why it hurts to see him as the subject of ridicule....

Pieter-Jan: *Everyone is allowed to have an opinion, but I don't think it's ok for my friend to be offended. A harmonious society is only possible if people respect each other. For example, if a man and a woman belittle each other every day based on free speech, their marriage will not last long.*

Ahmed: *The Prophet Muhammad has several hadiths in which he calls on people to love each other, be in solidarity with each other, respect each other despite different opinions.*

Teacher: *Thank you for sharing this with us. I think we learned a lot today! And remember: Violence should never be tolerated. Take care of each other. Show empathy. You may have an opinion, but don't impose it. Respect each other.*

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 **DUC8 Consortium**



Lapino Albino



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