Sir Iqbal Sacranie, secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, has said that he wishes to see Muhammad protected from insult or disrespect. Interestingly, he did not make this remark in the context of the current furore over the Danish cartoons of Muhammad. He said it much earlier, in a debate on BBC Radio 4's The Moral Maze on the subject of legislation to ban incitement to religious hatred. Sacranie's hope was that the new law once passed would be used to protect Muhammad from any negative criticism.

Sacranie was greatly disappointed with the form in which the religious hatred bill was eventually passed on 31st January, and complained of injustice and impediments to the promotion of a cohesive and harmonious society in Britain. However, he may soon find his hopes for the protection of Muhammad are fulfilled in the wake of the international response to the Danish cartoons of the Islamic prophet, a response which appears to have been not only orchestrated but deliberately aggravated.

The worldwide responses to the cartoons have raised two questions. (1) Why are Muslims, even "moderate" Muslims, so passionate in the defence of Muhammad from any kind of slight? (2) Why do British politicians and church leaders feel the need to tread so delicately around Muslim sensibilities?

The answer to the first question lies in the veneration of Muhammad. This is a paradoxical aspect of Islam, which in theory affirms the believer's direct access to God without the need for any intercessor. Accordingly, Muhammad should be viewed by Muslims as simply a human channel for God's revelation. In practice, however, Muhammad's figure towers over Islam not just as its founder, but as the "perfect man" who was divinely inspired not only in his Qur'anic revelations, but in all his sayings and deeds. He is considered infallible, free from sin, and serves as the supreme example which all Muslims are obliged to emulate in every small detail. Muhammad is also seen as the intercessor with God who can change the divine decrees and admit those he intercedes for into paradise. Love for Muhammad (and his family) is deeply inculcated into most Muslim children. Many Muslims, especially in the Indian subcontinent, hold that Muhammad was created from an eternal heavenly substance (Mohammedan light) that pre-existed with God.
He is a logos-like figure similar to Christ – a sinless saviour, mediator and intercessor.

A main concern of Muslims is the person of Muhammad who must be protected from any criticism or slight. Protecting his honour is an obligation on all. Any suspected denigration of Muhammad immediately creates disturbances and riots in many Muslim countries and communities, more so than blasphemy against Allah himself.

The antipathy towards pictures of Muhammad stems from several of his own comments, as recorded in traditions which Muslims call Hadith. An example is his statement that "angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or a picture" (Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 5.338). However, this has not been taken as an absolute prohibition in all kinds of

Islam at all times, as witness the numerous examples of Muslim paintings of Muhammad in earlier centuries.

Many Muslims have vocalised their outrage that the Danish cartoons could be interpreted as suggesting that Muhammad was a "terrorist". Here too is a paradox.  For these Muslims seek to portray Muhammad as a Jesus-figure, a peace-maker and channel of God's mercy, motivated by a profound love for humanity, who treated his enemies with forbearance, even kindness.  They say that Muhammad (himself) never killed anyone.  Yet Muhammad was a general who led his army in wars of conquest against non-Muslims, and under whom brutalities were committed against some of his opponents.  His words and example are cited by the most militant of Muslims today as the justification for their violence which others would call terrorism.


The second question concerns the reason for the special treatment of Muslims, in contrast to that of other groups.  Ask a British politician or church leader why they feel Muslim feelings should be protected and their reply will probably include words like "respect", "sensitivity", "courtesy" etc.  But is this the real reason?  It can be tested by comparing the treatment of Muslim sensibilities with the treatment of another faith's sensibilities, say, Christians.  Do the same voices protest against the numerous shows, artworks and writings which Christians find offensive and blasphemous?  Do they call for Christian feelings to be protected?  The answer is no.  The reason for this double standard appears to be not "sensitivity" but "fear".  Non-Muslim society – including the Church – is afraid of angering Muslims because of what they might do in retaliation. And what some of them might do was clearly seen in the placards carried by Muslim marchers in Britain last weekend with slogans such as "Massacre those who insult Islam" or "Whoever insults a prophet kill him."

The motive of fear also explains the double standards of the Metropolitan Police during the demonstrations in London against the cartoons.  None of those carrying placards calling for murder or beheading was arrested. Scotland Yard explained that the decision not to arrest was taken because they feared a riot would have ensued.  They did, however, arrest two other protestors, who were carrying cartoons of Muhammad.  Police said they were detained to "prevent a breach of the peace".  Evidently they did not fear a non-Muslim riot, only a Muslim riot.

The police have also shown double standards in their treatment of Christian evangelists, especially in Muslim areas of the UK.  There have been several incidents where police have intervened to prevent such evangelism, but Islam is strangely untouched.

Fear could also explain the strangely arrogant attitude of the government whereby they expect the public to formulate an opinion on the matter of the cartoons without having actually seen them.  Unless fear is invoked as a motive, this would seem to imply an astonishing lack of respect for the British people, treating them like children.

As a result of this fear we are on the verge of creating a no-go area in society which would allow Muslims to dictate the terms on which they will relate to the rest of the population and ban the discussion of

certain subjects.  The suggestion is that there are religious taboos linked to "core identity" which should be off-limits to others.

At first sight this seems a very generous and compassionate response to a minority in our midst.  Yet it could prove to be the thin end of the wedge.It could soon be followed by Muslim requests to have the voluntary self-censorship enshrined in law, by means of new blasphemy legislation to protect Muhammad from criticism.  The thick end of this particular wedge might be laws like those in Pakistan where since 1991 there has been a mandatory death penalty for "defiling the name of" Muhammad (Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code).  Furthermore, Muslims might seek a news/debate black-out on other issues connected with their "core identity" such as the treatment of women in Islam, honour killings, or the death penalty for Muslims who convert to another faith.  Then these important human rights issues could no longer be discussed in the UK.

The uneven playing field is a characteristic of Islam.  While Muslims rampage in fury about cartoons of Muhammad, no mention is made of the highly offensive anti-Christian and anti-Jewish cartoons produced by some Muslims, including blasphemous depictions of Christ.  Contrary to what Jack Straw has said, there is an open season to vilify Christianity.

A compliant press, an insipid Church and a pusillanimous government – all three erring on the side of pragmatism – are effectively allowing the playing field to be tilted in favour of Islam.   If ordinary British non-Muslims perceive this tilt, i.e. that non-Muslim society has in effect submitted to Muslims, a submission borne of fear, how will they react?  Is it possible that the British National Party will be the beneficiaries, being viewed as the only true protector of British values and Britain's Christian heritage?

Has the time come for Christians to be more assertive and demand their rights, that is, the freedom to proclaim the Gospel without intimidation even in Muslim areas of Britain and the withdrawal of material from the public domain which blasphemes against Christ?  Should not the Church speak out to affirm the continuing importance of Britain's Judaeo-Christian heritage?  And should we not all remember our history?  Appeasement does not ultimately bring peace.

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