

## Freedom is never having to say 'sorry'

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By Chibli Mallat

The Spanish Inquisition, most people would agree, was a dark moment in the history of the Catholic Church. The Crusades were another moment universally perceived as being negative because they involved conquest in the form of wars of religion. Yet Christians do not erupt in anger whenever such criticism is publicly vented, whether the source of that criticism is Christian or not. Why should we treat any differently criticism of a particular phase, or a particular trait, of Islam, Judaism, or for that matter the behavior of any religion or country in the world ?

There is no reason to apply a different standard because Pope Benedict XVI quoted a medieval Byzantine emperor who made negative comments about Islam; or after the uproar caused by a Danish newspaper's publication of disparaging drawings of the Prophet Muhammad. Or, for that matter, after a Lebanese satirical program, "Bas Mat Watan," took aim at Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah a few months ago, provoking demonstrations by party supporters. The threshold for freedom of expression is becoming too low, and it needs to be raised again.

Depending on who says what in which context, there will always be a moment when a statement is considered "unacceptable." The threshold may be lower or higher depending on the case, and there is always a certain discretion left to resisting excess in speech. But it is also important at key moments to take a stance, otherwise the threshold for free speech will continue to be lowered. Those who request apologies and stronger penalties for free expression should be defeated in the court of public opinion. This won't happen if demands for apologies from those who have said something deemed controversial are persistently backed up by the public at large. This reality can only infuse certain topics with a sanctity that permits no criticism, in a way that would further curtail open debate.

Take the case of "Bas Mat Watan." I believe that it was the silence of most Lebanese leaders on the occasion of the angry demonstrations organized that evening by Hizbullah's supporters in Beirut that encouraged Nasrallah to carry on acting as if he were the leader of Lebanon on July 12, when he approved of the abduction of two Israeli soldiers without consulting anyone. When a politician cannot be criticized on television, then criticism becomes far more difficult when the stakes are much higher, as in the latest war against Israel. There, voicing criticism of Hizbullah, and the party's accepting this, should have been a crucial step in helping mend disagreements between the party and its domestic political partners.

In much the same way that I see no need to censor critics of the Crusades or the Inquisition, I do not feel that my religion is endangered, or my coreligionists humiliated, because, for example, someone has chosen to condemn Christian Zionists in the United States. By the same token, Benedict's speech was well within the bounds of decency, no matter how much I disagreed with its implications. My personal beef with the example the pope provided comes from the fact that, unlike the Byzantine emperor quoted, one must differentiate between a religion and the violence carried out in its name. But even if the quote was inappropriate, critics

should be satisfied with discussing it, and strongly disagreeing if need be. Demanding an apology was unnecessary.

Beyond the quote chosen by Benedict, there is a more tragic dimension at play, one that concerns the fate of Christians in the Middle East. For the past half-century, the region's Christians have been increasingly threatened by a specific type of religious intolerance supported by extremists in the Muslim and Jewish communities. This is a situation which needs to be remedied, and a way to do so is to stop lowering the threshold of freedom of expression whenever Islam or Judaism is discussed in public.

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