



The Full text of the interview of the Secretary General with the Danish Daily Jyllands Posten, which was published on 28 October 2008

*Can You explain why You believe that critique of religion can be defined as racism?*

First of all let me be very clear on one point. We are neither against criticism of any religion nor calling for banning criticism of religions. History of religions, including Islam, is a history of criticism and debates which led to the formation of different sects and schools of thought. These debates have always been there at the academic, scholarly, or theological level. As for the debates which are conducted at the level of public opinion, we have no problem with any criticism, as long as they are objectives, fair and conducted in a responsible manner.

The problems start when religious beliefs of individuals belonging to any religion or venerated personalities of that religion a.i. prophets, whether Mohammed, Jesus or Moses, are ridiculed, denigrated and targeted with campaigns of insults with apparent or declared intent to incite hatred against the followers of this or that religion. I am quite surprised to see in the Danish press insinuations that I or the OIC are opponents of freedom of expression who are endeavoring to stifle this freedom by calling for banning of criticism of religions.

Everybody is entitled to criticize anybody or anything. How it is going to be done is completely up to one`s own norms, values and style of expressing his or her own ideas. We have no problem whatsoever with this. However, when freedom of expression is abused to ridicule and demonize with the intention to sow seeds of hatred against a group of peoples or citizens, then problems start because the rights of the victims of this incitement comes to the fore. It is not only OIC or OIC member states and myself who are expressing this understanding. I believe that starting from UN Secretary General and UN High Representative of Alliance of Civilizations to and many dignitaries in the Western countries have raised the same opinion. Moreover, the international community have given their frank endorsement to this opinion, through resolutions adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council, by large majority. This is tantamount to say that this opinion is the opinion of the international community and the international legitimacy.

*Can You give an example of a what kind of critique that should be defined as racism?*

We believe that incitement to religious hatred on religious basis is a new form of racism. The Western institutions dealing with Islamophobia are unanimous in

saying that the phenomenon of Islamophobia is worse than racial discrimination. In practical terms, in many instances it is difficult to determine what constitutes incitement to religious or racial hatred, which are both proscribed under the international human rights instruments. For example when a Muslim immigrant is discriminated against or physically attacked by extremists, the causes could be on racial or religious grounds or both. The daily attacks, physical or moral assaults against Muslims throughout the West is the proof of the negative effect of this hate speech campaign which has resulted in eroding human rights of those Muslim victims.

We should not forget that Anti-Semitism which caused horrendous tragedies for the European Jews last century can not be explained technically or lexically as a discrimination based only on race since the Jews who were subject to the inhuman treatments were mainly Europeans from different parts of the continent. This was also because of their religious affiliations. Within the same context, one should realize that the Palestinians who have been suffering from a grave tragedy for the last 60 years are ethnically Semitic but what happens to them is not defined as Anti-Semitism. What I am saying is that discrimination is discrimination whether on religious or racial grounds. I believe we are facing a gross campaign of disinformation on the part of some extremist quarters in the West and some European politicians who have either wrong understanding of the matter or trying to exploit the issue for domestic political gains by creating an uncalled-for fear of the "other".

*Why should it not be possible to criticize a religion?*

In my previous answers, I tried to explain my views in this regard. If I may elaborate, I can add the following. Criticism of religions is there for centuries. Trying to humiliate, insult others, and jeopardize their basic human rights based on their religious beliefs, particularly in the case of Muslims whose religion is followed by 1.5 billion people, is understood as an act which fall outside the borders of critical dialogue or civilized criticism.

Narrowing down the discussion on the freedom of expression to the freedom to be able to even denigrate the most sacred religious values is neither civilized nor intellectual. Yet, at the diplomatic level, we are not even focusing on this aspect. What we are saying is that incitement for hatred should not be allowed, as long as this specific act constitutes a crime within the parameters of international human rights documents, particularly article 20 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which requests the governments to take measures at the national level against incitement to religious hatred.

What we are also advocating is that we should all abide not only by the domestic laws or if there exists any, blasphemy laws or any code of conduct or ethics regulations, but also by the internationally agreed legal instruments.

*According to The Washington Post You recently said that there is a "red line" that should not be crossed. What do You mean by that? And what will happen if the "red line" is crossed?*

I think, there has always been and there should be a red line for any irresponsible attitude, whether it is on the individual or group of peoples levels. Nobody can deny that in the exercise of any particular freedom, one should act with a sense of responsibility. We might differ on the limits of where freedom stops and where responsibility starts. I would like to remind that all legal documents always strike a balance between freedoms and responsibility. With regard to freedom of expression the responsibility starts when there is an act of incitement to hatred proscribed by the international law. It is important to recall that the provision of freedom under human rights, the freedom of expression is the only freedom which is linked with responsibility.

As for the red lines, I would like to say that national flag for example is a sacrosanct symbol representing nationhood and sovereignty. Burning of a national flag is considered a red line proscribed by law even in many Western societies. This red line should be respected by others if they want to have cordial relations with that nation. If you say that where I was when the Danish flags were burnt and diplomatic premises attacked during the demonstrations against Denmark in some OIC member states, I reply by saying that I was among the first who condemned these practices as well as the violence surpassing the limits of peaceful reactions.

What we are against is not the criticism of religion perse but rather the intended objective of this criticism which is, in this case, jeopardize Muslim rights, by creating an atmosphere of hostility and rancor which make their life unsafe and strewn with prejudices of all kinds, and this is what international law prohibits. This would go against the values of living as a globalized human family. What humanity is in dire need is to foster a culture of peace based on mutual respect, understanding and dialogue among civilizations and cultures.

