



Power of passion **By** **Shada Islam**

Another week, another headline-grabbing attempt to offend and rile millions of Muslims. In fact, a very successful attempt, since violent protests in Libya, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere against an amateur ‘film’ produced in the US have resulted in the deaths of some 30 people (including the US ambassador to Libya), while buildings have been burnt down and shops looted. A French satirical magazine has just published offensive illustrations of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). More such material is probably being readied for release. And so the controversy continues.... The stubbornness of those who won’t stop ranting against Islam is matched only by the fury of those who think defence of their religion means killing and dying. The vitriol is getting tedious — and very predictable. To most rational people across the world, the anti-Muslim material being released is simplistic, mean and very unpleasant. The same applies to the recent Newsweek ‘Muslim Rage’ cover — and cover story. The magazine used to be a respected must-read. But the search for sales and publicity has long pushed the publication into a publicity-seeking machine. Truth and objectivity are no longer a priority.

Interestingly, somehow today freedom of expression only applies to expressions of nastiness, the ‘freedom to offend’. And then there are the inciters and agent provocateurs, men like Terry Jones, the furious Quran-burning pastor in the US, and murderers like Wade Michael Page, a white supremacist who killed half a dozen people at a Sikh temple in the US and Norway’s Anders Breivik who gunned down almost 90 innocent young people last year.

The Norwegian courts have ruled that Breivik is sane and thrown him into prison. Sane, yes — but perhaps also slightly unhinged by his toxic anti-Islam obsession. And what to make of some so-called Muslim leaders who also encourage hatred, and believe that violence is the best way of getting even? Instead of egging their more gullible friends along, shouldn’t they be urging a more peaceful display of their anger?

As the Egyptian-born cleric Youssef al-Qaradawi has pointed out, “Our manner of protesting should reflect sense and reason.” But such appeals — while frequent from many Islamic leaders and scholars in the past week — have competed against opposing calls that can tap deeper passions. Passion — the sentiment driving this sad saga along is often viewed as negative and destructive. But passion can actually be a good and constructive thing.

The world’s most influential and admired leaders have been passionate men and women; passionate in their beliefs, passionate in their thinking and in their conduct. The world’s best discoveries are the result of years of research by passionate scientists. Doctors find cures because of their passion for saving humanity and easing suffering.

We can all remember teachers and professors whose passionate love for their subjects fashioned us as students. Of all the stories we read and the films we watch, it is the ones directed and acted with passion which move and stir us the most. Looking back at the events over the last week, I can’t help wondering: instead of exploiting people’s passions in such a destructive way, wouldn’t it be interesting if those on both sides of the divide would channel their passion into something more constructive?

There is much to be passionate about — or as Newsweek would have it, much to be enraged about — in the world today. And it goes beyond movies and magazines. How about peaceful protests and sit-ins against the daily massacre of hundreds of innocent Syrians? As I was writing this column, reports said that scores of people were killed and wounded in a series of air strikes across Syria. The new UN and Arab League envoy for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi has said the death toll (estimated at around 19,000) in the conflict is “staggering” and the destruction “catastrophic”.

Syria’s main opposition bloc has said it wants Arab states to work together to effect an international intervention in Syria similar to the joint initiative in Libya. “We call on the Arabs to undertake a clear and serious initiative, like the position they took towards the Libyan revolution,” Syrian opposition leaders have said. Shouldn’t Muslim groups and activists be protesting against the alleged crimes against humanity being committed by President Bashar Assad and backing Syrian opposition calls for an Arab initiative to end the deadly conflict?

Passion against the crimes against women and children still committed in the 21st century — especially in many parts of the Muslim world — would be helpful in putting an end to the scourge. Anger and passion may help to get clean water, better quality food, solidly built buildings in poorer countries. Angry Europeans in countries hit by the currency crisis are demanding that their governments stop cutting budgets and also spend time and money on boosting economic growth. Angry voters can change governments at the ballot box, take people to court and demand

that their leaders be accountable for their actions and policies. The world needs people with spirit, fire in their bellies, and a passion for making things better. What we could do without are inelegant, senseless provocations that reveal meanness of spirit and nastiness. But people with the power to mobilize others — even to the point of killing others or themselves — also have the duty to act in a responsible manner. Hate travels fast in our interconnected globalised world. Love does too. Unfortunately, for the moment, it's the hate-mongers who appear to have the upper hand.

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