



**Ursula Owen**

## Getting used to offence

A series of high profile disputes between religious and creative communities in Britain touches on a central question about how we live now — should people in a diverse, multicultural society be protected from offence and insult simply because they demand it in the name of religion, curtailing free speech where necessary? Ursula Owen, speaking at a recent conference in Amman, says the answer from *Index on Censorship* has to be a resounding no.

If one believes that the press plays a central watchdog role, providing information to allow citizens to make up their own minds, the story I'm about to tell is an interesting case study. The British press is operating in a country which has over the past twenty years or so become increasingly culturally diverse.

And the story, though a British one, is relevant to a world where cultural diversity has become the norm. And finally — and this is another aspect of cultural diversity — the story goes to the heart of one of the most difficult aspects of free expression: the ability to tolerate being offended.

The story begins with an interesting and somewhat surprising phenomenon in Britain: the reassertion of religion in political life. Surprising, because if someone had predicted twenty five years ago that religion would again become central to political life in Britain, no one would have believed them.

I want to talk about the phenomenon and its connection with cultural diversity and pluralism. I want to talk about the part that censorship and self censorship has been playing in the debates that are being sparked off all over Britain as a result of the phenomenon. And I want to show how the media has tracked the issue and assess how, and how well, it has performed in reporting the full breadth of what has been going on.

Britain over the past decades has become increasingly culturally diverse, and this has, to some extent, succeeded in dismantling the definition of Britain as white. But we have to address a new chapter in the story of multiculturalism — in which it seems that British identity is no longer synonymous simply with a Christian/secular accommodation. Other religions, with different cultural practises and different attitudes to the sacred are making themselves heard in the public arena. And some of the consequences are disturbing.

How is Britain dealing with this reappearance of religion in politics? With difficulty, I would say. Opinion is split in many different directions. For instance, we have been used to insisting that religion is strictly a private matter, but that is being profoundly challenged by a British Muslim community which uses old and familiar arguments around identity politics.

The fact is that British Asians — Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus — are increasingly choosing to define themselves by their religion and not their ethnicity. This presents a serious dilemma for those who believe that when religion impinges on or drives our politics we have a society in conflict.

Cultural diversity is a fact in Britain. Multiculturalism — a policy, ideal or reality that emphasises the unique characteristics of different cultures — is what we have done with the fact, for good or ill. Some believe that multiculturalism has been a failure. For different communities to coexist side by side in one country, keeping their cultural identities separate, you need most of all equal respect, but also you need this respect translated into action, and financial support. Some argue that neither the equal respect nor the action has been sufficient.

In the past few months there have been some extraordinary events which have sharpened the debates around these matters, and have revolved substantially around the issue of free expression. On 20 December 2004, a play called *Behzti* (Dishonour), written by a young Sikh woman, was closed down by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

The play raises issues that some of the community would rather not discuss — the possibility that principles of equality, compassion and modesty are sometimes discarded in favour of outward appearance, wealth and the quest for power. In other words the play discusses the fallibility of human nature.

One of the encouraging and unusual things about this play, which had already been performed several times, is that the theatre and the author consulted the Sikh community before the play went on. Significant concessions were made: a statement from the local Sikh community was distributed; peaceful public protest would not be opposed; the programme contained positive messages about the Sikh faith (the author, incidentally, feels that the production was respectful to Sikhism). These were seen as serious commitments to cultural diversity.

But it was made clear that the play could neither be censored nor banned, and this was understood by many of the Sikh community, but not all. A significant minority instigated serious violence against the theatre, shouting abuse, throwing bricks through windows, terrifying the audience in the foyer. Under pressure from their own mob, Birmingham's Sikhs abandoned negotiation. Refusing to guarantee that there would be no more attacks on the theatre; they stood back and let the men of violence take over. The theatre did not feel able to expose their audience to this level of violence. The play closed. The playwright was physically threatened and verbally abused, her family harassed.

The press in Britain reacted in different ways — depending on the politics of the newspaper, the ethnic origins and religion of the correspondent, the attitude of the paper to the influence of minority groups in Britain, and on attitudes to free expression, something which lies at the core of Britain's liberal secular society.

It was a fierce and difficult debate. Here are some examples: a British born Pakistani playwright compared the destruction of a theatre to the destruction of a temple. "Our culture is as crucial to the liberal community as temples are the religious community". The director of the Sikh human rights group said Sikhs do not mind criticism of their religion or exposure of hypocrisy, or even satire, but that British Asian communities are sensitive to offence of the sacred. He

claimed that the defence of free speech is sometimes a disguise for old colonial attitudes; that the British have their own sacred icons, such as the monarchy, but are uncomfortable with different cultures, and that liberals are sometimes the most xenophobic.

### The right to offend

The playwright herself wrote that she wholeheartedly stood by her work, was supported by many people, including Sikhs, expressed pride in coming from the Sikh community, says that she did not write *Behzti* in order to offend, but that it was a play in part about human frailties. She argued that religion and art have collided for centuries, and will continue to do so long after her play is forgotten. The crucial questions of how differences in perspective and belief are negotiated in Britain today will, she hopes, continue to bring about lively and vital debate.

A British writer made the point that the right to freedom of expression must include the right to offend, that no progress would ever have been made without this right. A magazine editor seemed to suggest that some lines are unlikely to be crossed; for instance, if there was a pictorial representation of the Prophet, even if the individual might have the right in law to publish one, the immeasurable insult and damage to life and property that the exercise of such a right would cause would probably make the price too high.

This was hotly contested by a novelist who said that it's easy to support the free speech of somebody you agree with or to whose opinion you are indifferent. The real defence of free speech begins at the point when people say something you don't like, even hate. If you can't defend their right to say it, then you don't believe in free speech. A columnist, replying to a Sikh leader who asked whether it was worth upsetting 600 000 Sikhs in Britain and maybe 20 million outside the UK for the sake of the 5000 people would have seen *Behzti*, said yes, it probably was.

You can see how incredibly complicated this issue is, one even secular commentators found it very difficult to tease out. You can also see, I hope, that the press did a good job in covering all shades of ideas and opinions, sometimes in the same newspaper.

A mere two weeks after the *Behzti* affair, in January this year, 45 000 Evangelical Christians contacted the BBC via email to try and prevent the showing of *Jerry Springer -- the Opera*. This modern opera is a satire on popular culture and sexual mores, extremely frank, carrying innumerable swear words, very provocative language, and treats Jesus with irreverence.

What it also does is treat popular culture very seriously, making clear some of its dangers. The BBC did not bow to the pressure and went ahead with the broadcast. Hundreds of Christian protestors then rallied outside the BBC buildings before and during the broadcast. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that they had been influenced by the Sikhs' successful protest.

Again, the papers reporting this story were divided in their response. A veteran journalist on *The Times* said that blasphemy is not acceptable from a publicly funded broadcaster; the *Daily Mail* claims the protesters failed to understand that the show was not an attack on God, Jesus or Christianity, but an attack on the values of modern television.

The *Daily Telegraph* editorial discussed the apparent double standards that operate against Christians, claiming that members of other faiths frequently succeed in silencing blasphemy. It adds that Muslims seem to have an easier ride, political correctness and political cowardice combining to make producers especially wary of their displeasure.

The *Daily Express* said such a show was fine for the theatre, where people had to buy a ticket and go, but the screening on TV should never have been allowed. It added that some of our best writers have had to find ways of defying very strict boundaries and their work was all the greater as a result.

*The Independent* made it clear that in Britain there is no right not to be offended, that our society is held together by the bonds of toleration, and the idea that one group can curtail the harmless enjoyment of another is unacceptable. No one was compelled to watch the show on TV, and the editorial felt that the religious zealots have had their say in what we can and can't see, and that it's time for the tolerant majority in Britain to make its voice heard.

Once again, coverage of this event, which touches on many aspects of pluralism and diversity, was wide, with many different voices and opinions heard. One had to read many different papers to have the whole range of opinion, but even so I think it fair to say that we could be quite proud of the media as a whole.

There was something for everyone. This is a relatively new phenomenon. Papers once used to be answerable only to governments and social elites. Now this has changed. Over the past twenty year or so, through lobby groups and an audience which can afford to be choosy because it has a wide range of news sources, the press has become answerable to a much more diverse audience.

Overall, the debate touched on a central question about how we live now — should people in a diverse, multicultural society be protected from offence and insult simply because they demand it in the name of religion, curtailing free speech where necessary?

The answer from *Index on Censorship* has to be a resounding no. Most of our contemporary ideas about freedom of speech and imagination come from the Enlightenment. The battle for the Enlightenment was fought over the Church's desire to place limits on thoughts and words. We may have thought we'd won the battle for ever, but we may not have.

The British government is proposing to bring in a law preventing incitement to religious hatred. It is, as many have pointed out, a dangerous and slippery slope to censorship which will defend no one. What is more, we think it quite wrong that there exists a blasphemy law which is intended to protect Christianity from insult. We will campaign to remove it from the statute books.

Offence and insult are part of everyday life for everyone in Britain. If you open a daily paper, there's always plenty to offend. Yes, some groups are more vulnerable than others, but censorship does not protect them in the long run. In democracies people do become extremely upset with each other's ideas, and argue vehemently against each other's positions.

The trick surely is that one can be savage about what a person thinks, provided you aren't savage about them as a person. We need to keep our nerve, and

persuade all citizens that being offended is an occupational hazard in a free society, that offensive words, whatever they are, whether about sacred or secular matters, should be answered with more words, and not with censorship. And we need a free press to reflect every point of view in this difficult debate.

*Ursula Owen was addressing a conference on Media and Good Governance in Amman on 14–16 February 2006.*

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