Academic Writing

SAMPLE 1 – for ABC-CLIO "Essential Questions" Library

Reconciling the Islamic Ban on Images of Muhammad with Western Free Expression

Dale McGowan, Ph.D.

Civilization entails the continuous collision of old and new values and practices. Sometimes the collision results in the unqualified replacement of a past value. In other cases, new proposals have been rejected and existing norms continued, such as the movement to discontinue capital punishment in the United States.

But perhaps the most common outcome of the collision of old and new values is a degree of compromise and co-existence. The result is often imperfect, but such compromises, even among strongly felt values, represent an earmark of a diverse and open society. It is into this last category of co-existent values that the Islamic prohibition on images of Muhammad can be reconciled with the values of Western society, especially in the U.S. context.

Democratic society relies on our collective ability to distinguish between values on which we must agree and those on which we may productively differ. The process of winnowing is not always easy, but the continued existence of strong open societies that place that process at the heart of their social contract shows that it can be done, and done well. Millennia of law have placed murder in the "must agree" category, even as the definition of what kinds of killing constitute murder has varied. A prohibition on murder is even enshrined in the Ten Commandments, a moral document at the foundation of three major world religions. Rather than being supplanted, this very old human value has been repeatedly reaffirmed. The reason is clear—there is universal agreement that murder is harmful to human flourishing, not only for the individual killed, but for the society that permits murder in its midst.

Other long-established values and practices have been soundly rejected. Slavery, despite endorsement by ancient code, sacred scripture, and economic expediency, has gradually been abolished as Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty have found fuller expression. Something once considered justified is now considered harmful to human flourishing, in part by a long-overdue expansion in the definition of humanity.

The co-existence of conflicting values is well represented by the legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S. The institution now co-exists with opposite-sex marriage, but no one is forced to condone, conduct, or participate in such a union, and active discrimination against it is not allowed. Unlike murder, the practice was deemed harmless to individuals and to society. Opposite-sex marriage was not declared harmful and abolished, like slavery. Instead, individuals may choose between straight and gay marriage, with neither forcing its preference on the other.

This co-existent approach to resolving a conflict of values offers the best option for reconciling the prohibition on images of Muhammad with Western values of free expression: some will follow the prohibition, unmolested, while others decline to do so, equally unmolested.

Religious prohibitions in cultural context

Many religious prohibitions were more easily enforced when their founding cultures were isolated from other cultures. It would not have been difficult to avoid foods prohibited by the Jewish *kashrut,* for example, in the Iron Age Kingdom of Israel. Prohibited foods would not even find their way into the cultural infrastructure of farming or importation, much less food processing and distribution. There would have been no need to know whether an animal was slaughtered in a kosher or non-kosher manner because kosher preparation was culturally universal.

But once observant Jews were scattered in diaspora, living in close physical proximity with different religious and ethnic cultures, the challenge of remaining faithful to religious restrictions increased. A common response— one still taken today in some communities—was the creation of separate Jewish quarters within larger cities, especially in Europe and the Middle East. Though such ghettoes were often imposed by Christian or Muslim majorities to prevent "contamination" of their own religious cultures by the Jewish presence, or to exert pressure to convert, the isolation offered one compensation: it was easier to observe religious traditions, including dietary prohibitions, without the need to accommodate differences with the adjacent culture.

After the Second World War, Jewish ghettoes and quarters became less common in European and American cities as Jewish communities physically integrated with the populations around them. The benefits of decreased isolation brought with them the challenge of maintaining religious culture, including diet. By establishing and supporting kosher food production and preparation businesses, observant Jews have been able to reconcile a treasured religious practice with the presence of neighbors and friends who do not observe the same practice.

The same can be said (with appropriate historical adjustments) of Islamic *halal* dietary restrictions: The challenge is greater in mixed cultural landscapes, and that challenge has been well met.

But diet is different from many other religious observances in one important respect: its impact can be easily limited to individuals. I can abstain from eating pork without requiring you to do the same. It's harder for me to abstain from hearing something that is forbidden if you play it through loudspeakers, and hard for me to avoid seeing something forbidden if you prominently display it in public places.

Even so, Western multi-religious society has wrestled with many such conflicts, often working out compromises that work, even if they fail to fully satisfy all parties. Many of these have been deeply-felt issues in the Judeo-Christian world.

(End of excerpt)

NOTES

[1] Exodus 20:4-6, Holy Bible, King James Version.

[2] Brockopp, Jonathan (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad.* London: Cambridge University Press (2010),130.

[3] Faces of Mohammed. http://facesofmohammed.ip0.eu/

[4] "Ijtihād." Oxford Islamic Studies Online. http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0354

[5] "Taqlid." Oxford Islamic Studies Online. http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2339

[6] "U.S. Muslims — Views on Religion and Society in a Global Context," survey of the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, 2011. http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-app-a/

SAMPLE 2 – for ABC-CLIO "Essential Questions" Library

"Enlightenment" in Buddhist and Western Contexts
Dale McGowan, Ph.D.

Some concepts travel easily between languages and cultures. There are words for dog, sleep, tree, water, food, walk, and death in every language, making translation a simple matter of word substitution. But other words, especially those describing less concrete concepts, can suffer a loss of clarity and meaning as they cross between cultures. Sometimes a concept that lives comfortably in one culture is entirely unfamiliar to another. But perhaps the greatest confusion results when a concept exists and is named in two cultures, but with very different real meanings. Members of each culture assume they know what is meant by the other culture's use, when in fact they are translating through their own cultural filter, often to a markedly different meaning. It is into this last category that the concept of "enlightenment" falls when traveling between the Buddhist and Western contexts.

The distance between East and West is an additional confounding variable. Concepts tend to travel more easily between cultures with relatively recent points of divergence and geographic proximity—between two European cultures, for example, or two West African cultures. But because East Asian and Western cultures went through an extraordinary period of independent

cultural evolution—as much as 35,000 years by some estimates—it is not uncommon to encounter concepts that seem to defy translation between the two cultural spheres.

Religious and philosophical concepts are among the most likely to fall prey to these translation difficulties. The word *t'ien* (or *tian),* for example, one of the most important ideas in Chinese philosophy, is best translated as "that which causes the world to be as it is." The English language lacks a concise term for this—a problem known as a "lexical gap." Translators can hardly be expected to replace a single short word with a ten-word phrase, especially when that word occurs as often as *t'ien* does in Chinese philosophy. They are left with no choice but to substitute the closest available approximation of meaning.

The most common English translation of *t'ien* is "heaven"—an often-fatal corruption of the writer's intent. Those who consider a deity to be the cause of everything use *t'ien* to denote that deity. But a very large number of key Chinese philosophers, including Mencius and Xun Zi, are entirely nontheistic. They see only natural causes at work in the world, so they use *t'ien* to mean "nature" or "natural laws." Translating this as "heaven" utterly confuses their meaning for the English reader, rendering many important passages of Chinese philosophy incomprehensible.[1]

Similarly, several different Buddhist terms and concepts are typically translated as "Enlightenment" in English. The facts that the East-West distance is involved, as well as abstract religious terminology, and that not one but several Buddhist terms are conflated into one, all should lead the serious English-language student of Buddhism to proceed with caution to ensure understanding.

The Western concept of Enlightenment

"Enlightenment" in the European context is associated primarily with the 18th century movement of the same name. But like most intangible intellectual and artistic movements—the Baroque Period, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution, for example—the name was applied to the movement only in retrospect, many years after its conclusion, as a translation of the French *Éclaircissiment* or German *Aufklärung.* Both of these terms were used within the period itself, and both are closer in meaning to "clarification" than to the current usage of enlightenment.

The difference between "clarification" and "enlightenment" may seem small, but it hints at the very distinction between current usage in Buddhism and the West. Clarification implies a

---

[1] Chang, Ruth (2000). "Understanding Di and Tian: Deity and Heaven From Shang to Tang." *Sino-Platonic Papers* 108:1–54.

[3] Chacon, Richard (2014). *The Great Awakening and Southern Backcountry Revolutionaries.* Springer.

[4] Matthews, Robert J. (Apr 1977). "Q&A: Questions and Answers." New Era magazine: 46–47.

process, a gradual movement toward clarity, as described in Immanuel Kant's seminal 1784 essay "Was ist Aufklärung?":

> *Aufklärung* is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This immaturity is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. *Dare to know!* (*Sapere aude*.) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the *Aufklärung*.

The period was marked by an increase in rational, scientific methodologies and a rejection of traditional religious and ideological dogma. At the heart of the philosophy was a new approach to "interrogating reality," an optimistic vision of perpetual progress fueled by reason and a rational ethic.

But neither the term nor the concept of "enlightenment" as currently understood was used by the writers and thinkers of the period. It was in the early 19th century, inspired by Indian religions including Buddhism and Jainism, that Romantic spiritual movements such as Transcendentalism and religious revivals known as Great Awakenings brought the first significant concept of "spiritual enlightenment" to the United States and United Kingdom.[3] Unlike the Eastern traditions, these movements were often highly individualistic, focusing on enlightenment as an experience of self-improvement and self-realization. And a frequent defining element of these realizations was their suddenness—an event best described as epiphany.

The founding story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is emblematic of the 19th century link between epiphany and enlightenment. The supposed visitation by the angel Moroni granting knowledge of a new testament of Jesus Christ in the New World was used to create not only the Book of Mormon, but a revision of the Bible itself called the Joseph Smith Translation—a revision referred to as enlightened by the LDS Church. "The explanations and changes made by the Prophet Joseph Smith provide enlightenment and useful commentary on many biblical passages."[4]