

Reply to Zach Churchill

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Zach Churchill makes a mistake opponents of freedom often make (Letter to the Editor, 18 October). Mr Churchill supposes that freedom of expression is for something. (According to Mr Churchill, freedom of expression is "a means to criticise those in power...") Should freedom of expression not pay its way in securing some social goal he favours, Mr Churchill would straightaway kick it off the bus.

But those of us passionate about freedom of expression want it for its own sake, not (only) for the sake of something else. We simply like that we and others will say what we want to say without fear of being silenced or punished by an authority. We love freedom of expression for itself as we love many other things for themselves: our friends, political equality, knowledge, that our students become competent and committed intellectuals, the happiness and well being of our fellow citizens or of people generally, the music of Serge Gainsbourg, beauty, our children, our pets, tennis, whatever. Sometimes, of course, we have to make compromises among those things that matter to us for their own sakes. One deep commitment can conflict with another in a particular case, and then we have to choose against one of them. We will not find it easy to forsake something that matters to us and we will regret having to do so.

So I can imagine agreeing with Mr Churchill that this or that restriction on expression is justified in light of either threats to equality or the plight of members of a beleaguered and vulnerable minority. Unlike Mr Churchill, though, I would be terribly sad to have to advocate restrictions on expression—but, were the situation dire and the means crucial, advocate restrictions I would. One practical question for Mr Churchill and me, then, in cases like that of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, is whether administrative suppression of expressions involving racist or otherwise offensive materials is a necessary, or even effective, way of promoting the social goals we share.

Mr Churchill thinks suppressing displays of the cartoons is an effective way to promote peace among nations and equality of opportunity for Muslims in Canada. The cartoons, Mr Churchill charges, embody racist stereotypes. Displays of the cartoons, then, will or might work to reinforce or even to engender prejudice against Muslims. Individuals prejudiced against Muslims will act badly toward those whom they think are Muslim, and Muslims will suffer.

Let us suppose that one or another of the cartoons does indeed embody racist stereotypes. What reason do we have to think that displaying that cartoon actually *promotes* racist attitudes? What reason do we have to think that Peter's displaying the cartoons might well have brought someone to the side of racism? I'd like to see studies. Perhaps Peter's displaying the cartoons had

the salutary effect of causing people prejudiced against Muslims to notice and criticise their bias. We don't know either way. Before we can judge the effectiveness of censorship in realizing some social goal, we need to evaluate whatever relevant research we can get. Mr Churchill cites no relevant research. We ought not just assume that censorship will be an effective tool.

Let us suppose that people prejudiced against Muslims will try to act badly against those whom they think are Muslim. How will they try to act badly against Muslims? By denying them equality of opportunity, jobs, education, health care, a spot at the lunch counter, a seat on the airplane, freedom of dress, effective policing? Let them try!—and then fine the bastards heavily or cart them off to jail.

While we are supposing these things, do keep in mind that even if suppressing expressions of racism has some good effect, our energies in the fight against racism and for social justice could well be better spent in ways that don't involve suppressing any ideas or images. Our energies would be well used criticising bad ideas and images and making our own good ones. Our energies would be well used in at least twenty-seven other ways, including, of course, doing what we can to ensure that Muslims in Canada enjoy equality of opportunity and all the rest. I wonder: Are there adequate channels through which Muslims in Canada can speak to other Canadians to make their concerns and aspirations known? Are there adequate channels for Muslims here at Saint Mary's? If not, let's get to work.

Mr Churchill contends that the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons embody false and pernicious stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. He might be right. Let us find out. But wait—finding out would require that we examine the cartoons. But we are not to view the cartoons. After all, they embody false and pernicious stereotypes. Viewing them might confirm us in our prejudices or, worse, make us prejudiced. We will just have to trust the censors who have viewed the cartoons that indeed they embody false and pernicious stereotypes and that it is right that we not see them.

That's the final point I wish to make. Employing censorship and suppression in our endeavour to create an egalitarian and just society means handing to our politicians, bureaucrats, police, and courts an awful lot of power and then turning our backs and trusting them to use it wisely. Even those who, with Zach Churchill, have no particular liking for freedom of expression might fear going this route.

Let me list the points I have made. 1) Zach Churchill thinks of freedom of expression as a tool that has been granted to us by our nation for a purpose or a set of purposes. I, on the other hand, love freedom of expression and love it for its own sake. I would no more that you or I be without it than that you or I be without music or our friends or our children or whatever else we love (no matter how bad your music, how no-account your friends, how rotten your children). 2) Nonetheless, Mr Churchill and I are concerned that Saint Mary's, and Halifax, and Canada, and even the world be peaceful, egalitarian, and just. We agree that we would have a strong, though perhaps not compelling, reason to accept restrictions on expression were those restrictions effective in promoting peace, equality, or justice. 3) Mr Churchill gave us in his letter no reason to think that restrictions on expression do or could promote peace, equality, or justice. (I would note on the other side that at least one great contemporary liberation movement, that of lesbians and gays, did extremely well entirely without the aid of laws against homophobic expression.) 4) We have in Canada, or should insist on having, strong protections against discrimination in hiring, education, housing, and the rest. Let the school teacher say whatever he wants about Jews (talk back to him, of course); fire him if he fails to teach his Jewish charges (or any of his charges) well. 5) Whether the weight of evidence turns out to be with Mr Churchill or not, much can be done to bring about peace, equality, and justice without suppressing anyone's expressions. 6) Trust officials to suppress only

racist expression? Might as well trust the puma roaming your house to eat only the mice.