

Statement by Richard S. Gordon on Coalition to Defend Free Speech

President American Jewish Congress

October 2, 2008

National Press Club, Washington D.C.

The American Jewish Congress has a long tradition of defending the First Amendment freedoms and has opposed attempts to limit free expression. We hold that the free exchange of ideas, including ones we all too often find offensive or defamatory of things we hold dear, is crucial for social progress.

That's why we have helped organize the Coalition to Defend Free Speech. Not only are the current attempts to ban expression critical of religion fundamentally wrong but they block the discussion of one of today's most important problems: the relationship of Moslem states to modernity, the internal debates within Moslem countries and the nature of the religious, cultural and intellectual exchange between Moslems and the West.

Statement by Floyd Abrams on Coalition to Defend Free Speech

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Religion matters. Precisely because it matters so much, it is all the more important for people to feel free and be free to speak out about it without fear of state-imposed sanctions. While it must rest with religions themselves to determine their own beliefs and doctrines, there must be no world-wide government-enforced notions of heresy or blasphemy.

That is why the continuing efforts of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (“OIC”) to ban the “defamation” of religion or (in its current incarnation) the “incitement to hatred” of religion is so dangerous. If successful, such efforts would have the on-the-ground effect of banning the works of Danish cartoonists of the future, suppressing the writings of future Salman Rushdies and imprisoning movie-makers from around the world. This intolerable effort of one group of nations to determine what may be said and ultimately thought throughout the world must be resisted.

In saying this, I am not suggesting that religions are never defamed or that those who actually do so are admirable or morally pure. Islam has sometimes been falsely characterized and meanly described. So, it should not be necessary to say, have other religions. But the dangers of seeking to suppress such speech -- let alone to define what speech actually “defames” as opposed to “criticizes” -- greatly outweighs the harm done in permitting it.

A case decided by the US Supreme Court in 1940 is instructive. A Jehovah’s Witness approached two men on a street in New Haven, Connecticut. The men were Catholic. The man played a phonographic record which by any standard defamed the Catholic Church. The man was asked -- told -- to leave and he did so. He was later arrested and charged with inciting a breach of the peace. The Supreme Court invalidated his conviction, stating in part:

“In the realm of religious faith, and that of political belief, sharp differences arise. In both fields the tenets of one man may seem the rankest error to his neighbor. To persuade others to his own point of view, the pleaser, as we know, at times, resorts to exaggeration, to vilification of men who have been, or are, prominent in church or state, and even to false statement. But the people of this nation have ordained in the light of history, that in, spite of the probability of excesses and abuses, these liberties are, in the long view, essential to enlightened opinion and right conduct and right conduct on the part of citizens of a democracy.”

I am not suggesting that the same result need be reached by every other nation. But I do commend the Court's understanding of the nature of religious conflict and, too often, religious hostility. And I certainly agree with the Court's resolution of the matter. Most important, however, is that that case involved true "defamation" of religion and that what the OIC is concerned about is something else entirely.

What that organization objects to is speech that, by any rational definition, is quintessentially *political* in nature -- commentary about 9/11, views about terrorism and those possibly involved in it, criticism of certain arguably regressive precepts of Islam. If such speech is not protected, if such speech is to be banned and criminally prosecuted because these very topics are to be deemed off limits, the very heart of free expression would be overcome. That is why the formation of this coalition is warranted and why these efforts to impose a straightjacket on free expression in this area must be thwarted.

Statement by John Wohlstetter on Coalition to Defend Free Speech

Co-chair, Coalition to Defend Free Speech

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We have seen a growing threat to free speech since the attacks of September 11, 2001, but intensifying after the Danish cartoon riots of 2006. The values of free speech that form the moral, social, political and constitutional core of the West are being undermined by credible threats of violence and by the hijacking of the Western legal systems to file lawsuits as a weapon to injure the reputation and financially damage those speaking out freely. Nations of the West cannot bring the blessing of free speech to the non-Western world if they cannot protect such freedoms at home. The West must respond vigorously and promptly, making sure its values and laws are not turned into a collective suicide pact that destroys the very freedoms they are meant to secure.

Statement by Paula Schriefer on Coalition to Defend Free Speech

Director of Advocacy, Freedom House

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We have joined the coalition because the concept of defamation of religion is one of the most dangerous challenges to the fundamental freedom of expression we face today. It is not the only challenge, but it is an important one and it has been gaining traction at a time when people of all faiths need to engage in more, not less, dialogue. By limiting the very ability of people to raise questions, ideas and opinions, one undermines not only freedom of expression, but intellectual, academic and religious freedoms as well.

As for being perceived as anti-Islam, we believe that when people learn more about the goals of the coalition, they will understand that in fact the exact opposite is true. The movement to limit speech that is deemed critical or “blasphemous” to religions has been pushed most strongly by largely self-appointed governments of Muslim-majority countries and their citizens by far have been the most victimized by measures to restrict their speech and thought.

Statement by Kevin “Seamus” Hasson on Coalition to Defend Free Speech

Founder and President of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty

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These laws are part of a worldwide campaign to create international blasphemy laws. They are an assault on free speech and the free exercise of religion, couched in the diplomatic language of tolerance and respect. The Becket Fund has been opposing these laws at the United Nations and around the world for years, and we are proud to be a part of this coalition. An anti-defamation law is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. In passing these resolutions, the United Nations is damaging its credibility in the name of protecting hurt feelings. It is nothing but a gussied-up blasphemy law, and blasphemy laws ultimately hurt everyone and all believers, because they implicitly empower governments to decide which religious truth is right or wrong.

Statement by Dr. Morton Halperin on Coalition to Defend Free Speech

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Efforts to condemn and to criminalize the ill defined and vague concept of defamation of religion is a threat to the basic values protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These efforts are aimed at silencing critical debates about religion, on matters that are of concern not only to believers but all those who are impacted by the teachings of various faiths. They are a step backwards in the international protection of human rights and understanding and I join in opposing them.