

Censorship and literature: term paper

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



Censorship and Literature: Term Paper Ours is an age of information and technology, convenient, and readily-available. Any piece of information, opinion and critique is all but a mouse-click away. Like most advancements in technology, this is both a boon and a bane, a double-edged sword. The age of the Internet, in which we all reside now, has brought forth its fair share of controversies over the past few years. From the leaked sex tapes of Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian, to the relatively more important, and recent Wikileaks scandal, in which classified government information and news became available to the common layman sitting at home. Nothing is a secret anymore, nothing is sacred. The Internet has reared its ugly head too many times in the recent past. Therefore, to combat this rising problem, internet censorship has come into existence. Internet censorship, which is conducted by the government, or private organizations on behalf of the government, is used to control or suppress the publishing of, or access to information deemed “ not suitable”, for a variety of purposes. These various targets of censorship, often fall under broad headings such as i) politics and power, i. e., political blogs and web sites, ii) social norms and morals, that is pornographic sites, gambling sites, sites including hate speech, and anything that can be considered antithetical to accepted social norms, iii) security concerns, for example threats to national security, of which Wikileaks is the best example and iv) protection of intellectual property and existing economic interests, that is sites which share content that violates a copyright, and other intellectual property rights, for examples sites that sell or distribute music, but are not ‘ approved’ by rights holders. These measures, though beneficial in the sense that illicit information is made

unavailable to the public, have also sparked off the debates regarding freedom of speech and the right to information, as should be provided to all citizens, by the Constitution. By far one of the most controversial topics of Internet censorship of recent times has to do with the spread of anti-Islamic propaganda. In fact, there is a phobia named after it: Islamaphobia.

Islamaphobia, is defined as prejudice against, or the hatred and irrational fear of Muslims. Though the term dates back to the early 1900s, it has entered common vocabulary after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States. It is the dread and hatred of Islam, and therefore a fear and dislike of all Muslims, while at the same time the practice of discriminating against them by excluding them from the economic, social, and public life of the nation. It also includes the idea that Islam has no values in common with other cultures of the West, and is a violent political ideology, rather than a religion. Islamaphobia is fast becoming a topic of sociological and political importance. Take the issue of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, a novel which was first published in 1988 and inspired in part by the life of Muhammad, the Islamic Prophet. The title refers to the so-called “satanic verses”, a group of alleged Quranic verses that allow intercessory prayers to be made to three Pagan Meccan goddesses. The book sparked a major controversy when conservative Muslims accused it of being blasphemous and mocking their faith. It even led to a fatwa being called for the death of Rushdie, issued by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on 14th February, 1989. Rushdie was also accused of misusing his right to freedom of speech, and the book was duly banned in several countries. Another similar controversy,

The Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy, began when 12 editorial cartoons, most of which depicted Muhammad, were published in the Danish newspaper, on 30th September, 2005. The newspaper announced that this publication was an attempt to contribute to the debate regarding criticism of Islam and self-censorship. Muslim groups began to complain, in Denmark, and soon the unrest spread worldwide. What followed were riots, protests, bombings, and other such violent events. The controversy was described by the Danish Prime Minister as the “ worst international crisis since World War II”. The Muslims considered the cartoons to be blasphemous to people of the Islamic faith. But supporters of the publication of the cartoons claimed it to be a legitimate exercising of the right of free speech and expression. It is clear to see then, that the Muslims are overall, of the intolerable type. They will not stand for anything being said, written or drawn against their holy book, the Quran, their Prophet Muhammad, and his teachings. So much so that in Pakistan, blasphemy directed against either the tenets of the Quran or the Prophet Muhammad is punishable by either life imprisonment or death. It is because of this form of intolerance, that the Western cultures severely criticize Islam. The objects of their criticism include the morality of the life of Muhammad, the last prophet of Islam, both in his public and private life. Issues relating to the authenticity and morality of the Quran are also discussed by critics. One of the main objections of the Muslims is any form of depiction of their prophet. The permissibility of these depictions has long been a concern in the history of Islam. Oral and written descriptions are readily accepted by all traditions of Islam, but there is a controversy regarding the visual depictions. Though the Quran does not

explicitly forbid images of Muhammad, there are a few hadith (supplemental teachings) which have explicitly prohibited Muslims from creating visual depictions or figures. Most Sunni Muslims believe that visual depictions of all the prophets of Islam should be prohibited, with particular aversion to visual representations of Muhammad. The key concern is that the use of images can encourage idolatry. In Shia Islam, however, images of Muhammad are quite common nowadays, even though Shia scholars historically were against such depictions. Many images in Islamic art show Muhammad with his face veiled, or symbolically represented as a flame. That being said, it is not surprising to note that very few films have been made, depicting the life and times of Muhammad. The only modern one to do so was the 1976 film *The Message*. The movie focused on other persons and never directly showed the face of Muhammad, or most members of his family. When Muhammad was essential to the scene, the camera would show events from his point of view. Despite how “ safe” and non-controversial this film seemed to be, since the representation of Muhammad was conducted with the greatest respect, two fatwas, one from Al-Azhar University and another from the Shiite Council of Lebanon were issued about *The Message*. “ It is certainly probable that this is not the result of creativity of the filmmakers, but of the rules announced by the Islamic scholars of the Azhar and the Shiite Council of Lebanon, who prohibited any representation of Muhammad’s wives as well as of the Prophet himself”, was the statement formally announced. A more severe case occurred in Egypt in 1926, around the anticipated production of a film about the grandeur of the early days of Islam. Upon learning of his plan, the Islamic Al-Azhar University in Cairo

alerted Egyptian public opinion, and published a juridical decision (fatwa), stipulating that Islam categorically forbids the representation of Muhammad and his companions onscreen. Actor Youssef Wahbi was sent a severe warning, and a threat to exile him and strip him of his Egyptian nationality, by King Fauad. Other contemporary Shia scholars, outside Shia majority Iran, have taken a relaxed attitude toward pictures of Muhammad and his household, the Ahlul Bayt. A fatwa given by Ali al-Sistani, the Shia marja of Iraq, states that it is permissible to depict Muhammad, even in television or movies, if done with respect. Keeping this in mind, I can now finally turn to the topic of my term paper. It is an issue which is so recent, that most people have not even heard about it. But it is something that caught my attention and I decided to look into it. In July 2012, a 14 minute long video clip was uploaded to video-sharing website YouTube, under the titles The Real Life of Muhammad and Muhammad Movie Trailer. The title was later changed to what it is currently known as: “ Innocence of Muslims”. Reported to have been written and produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, and Egyptian born U. S. resident, the clip has already become infamous. Basseley, supposedly using the pseudonym of “ Sam Bacile”, initially denied being the controversial figure, but records uncovered by the Associated Press, and confirmations from the American federal authorities established Nakoula as being the same person as Sam Bacile. Nakoula claimed that he was creating an epic, two hour long movie; however no such film has been located. According to a consultant on the project, the video is a “ trailer” from a full-length film which was shown only once, to an audience of fewer than ten people, at a rented theater in Hollywood, California. Posters advertising the

film used the title “ Innocence of Bn Laden”. The film’s original working title was “ Desert Warrior”, and it supposedly “ told the story of tribal battles prompted by the arrival of a comet to Earth. ” The story initially had no religious references, (the full-length original script is available online), but anti-Islamic content was added in post production by overdubbing (and very poorly done overdubbing, too. It sounded like a shoddy job, even to a novice like me), reportedly without the actor’s knowledge. In fact, several actors have spoken out against this issue, saying that they feel “ exploited” and “ used”. (I shall get back to this later.) Matters became worse when the video was dubbed and uploaded in the Arabic language during early September, 2012 and were promoted by Egyptian American Coptic Christian lawyer Morris Sadek by email, and on the blog of the National American Coptic Assembly. On September 9th, 2012, two days before the anniversary of the terrible 9/11 attacks, an excerpt of the YouTube video was broadcast on Al-Nas TV, an Egyptian Islamist television station. Demonstrations and violent protest against the film broke out on September 11, a gruesome coincidence, in Egypt and spread to other Arab and Muslim nations and some western countries. The protests have led to hundreds of injuries, and over 75 deaths. Fatwas have been issued against the videos participants and a Pakistani minister has offered a bounty for the death of Nakoula. The video has since been voluntarily removed from YouTube, having violated its’ Terms of Service, now replaced by a message saying “ This video is no longer available because its content violated YouTube’s Terms of Service. ” The Obama administration asked YouTube to review whether to continue hosting the video at all under the company’s policy. YouTube claimed that the video

fell within its guidelines as the video is against Islam, but not against Muslim people, and this not considered hate speech. The statement released by them said: " This video — which is widely available on the Web — is clearly within our guidelines and so will stay on YouTube. However, given the very difficult situation in Libya and Egypt we have temporarily restricted access in both countries." Nevertheless, judging by the reactions which followed the videos release, its removal was a smart move on behalf of YouTube. Reuters described the video as depicting the Islamic prophet " as a fool, a philanderer and a religious fake" and showed him having sex. NBC News described it as depicting him " as a womanizer, a homosexual and a child abuser" (though, having watched the video, it is very clear to me that the words " child molester" were overdubbed, while the actors lips were shown mouthing something else entirely). The film received controversial support from U. S. pastor Terry Jones, who had already previously enraged Muslims by publicly announcing plans to " burn the Quran. " The film is also said to have been the cause behind the September 11 attacks on the U. S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, in which U. S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other members of his diplomatic mission were killed. Apart from that, a string of protest happened all over the world, including India, Egypt, Africa, America and Afghanistan. Also on September 11th, the U. S. diplomatic mission in Cairo, Egypt was mobbed by protestors, a group scaled the walls of the embassy and tore down the American flag and replaced it with a black Islamic flag. Just hours before the attacks, in response to the promotion of the film and in anticipation of those very protests, the U. S. Embassy in Cairo issued the following statement: " The

Embassy of the United States in Cairo condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims — as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions. Today, the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans are honoring our patriots and those who serve our nation as the fitting response to the enemies of democracy. Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy. We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others." Now I shall move on to addressing the trailer and its contents directly. To summarize, the script was originally written about life in Egypt, 2000 years ago, and was titled Desert Warrior, as mentioned before. It told the story of a character known simply as " Master George". The video opens in a present-day setting, in which Egyptian security forces are shown doing nothing as a mob of angry Muslim characters destroy Egyptian Christians' home and property. Hiding from the attack, a doctor and his family take shelter in their home, where the doctor takes up a pen and writes the following words on a whiteboard: " Man + X = BT". " BT" is overdubbed as " Islamic terrorists". The young woman asks what " X" is, to which the doctor says that she needs to discover that for herself. We then cut to a crass, supposed re-telling of the life of Muhammad, with scenes set in the past. Many of the details of George's story fit with Muhammad's biography. After his father dies, George is raised by his grandfather, like Muhammad. George is eventually taken in by a wealthy woman named Condalesa as a servant, and they marry. Muhammad also married the wealthy Khadija, after she put him in charge of her trading business. A scene showing Master

George crawling on all fours, and being prompted to place his head between the legs of an attractive woman “ Khadija”, who turns out to be his wife, is followed by Muhammad’s character seen speaking animatedly to a donkey, in an almost homoerotic way. In another scene, a worried mother exclaims “ Is your Muhammad a child molester? ”, when she is told her young daughter has to marry a 53 year old Muhammad. In the very next scene, his followers are overheard whispering to each other “ Is the Messenger of God gay? ” to which the other man calmly retorts “ Yes, he is! ” A few scenes later, he is seen coercing a girl into having non-consensual sex with him. Then, a 120 year old woman is seen to be tortured pathetically by Muhammad’s followers by having her legs tied to camels moving in opposite directions, all because she doubted the “ holiness” of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. Finally, a comically blood-stained, sword-bearing and bearded “ Mohammad” shouts out “ Every non-Muslim is an infidel. Their lands, their women, their children are our spoils! ” I tracked the video down with some degree of difficulty, and I wish I could say it was worth the effort. I have watched a fair number of movies, short films and documentaries, both for leisure and academia. So I would like to think I have a more or less sound knowledge of what makes a good movie, or even a passably decent movie. Without a trace of doubt, I can conclude that “ Innocence of Muslims” does not hit any of the checkmarks. Hammy, and at times, preposterous acting, crude green-screen special effects, stilted dialogue delivery, wooden dialogue and suspicious cutting and dubbing, and one of the worst overdubbing I have ever heard. An almost non-existent plot, terrible cinematography, and a vicious and bigoted tone, all of these define the film, to be put lightly. This is probably the first

time a charge of homosexuality has been put on the Prophet, in my knowledge. Though taking on a nine-year old girl Aisha as his pride was a common, albeit distasteful practice in Bedouin societies of the time, the Prophet's polygamy is parodied into a Benny Hill-style chase scene, with his many brides brandishing their sandals. I'm clearly not the only one to hold this view of the film. The New Republic said that the film " includes not a single artistically redeemable aspect" with " atrocious" directing, " terrible" sets and acting consisting of " blank eyes and strained line readings. " The New York Daily called it an " obscenely inept vanity project" that is " far beneath any reasonable standard of movie-making. " Salman Rushdie, who was recently involved in a high-profile controversy himself, has his two-cents, calling the filmmaker " outrageous and unpleasant and disgusting", and characterized the production as " clearly a malevolent piece of garbage. " According to me, the movie seems to be almost a spoof, or a caricature, like the Scary Movie franchise, which are funny parodies of popular horror films. It seems to be a film which is aware of how ridiculous it is. The director was under no obligation to pay homage to, or respect the Prophet of a religion to which he does not even subscribe. So the collective criticism the film has received is not based only on the subject he chose as his project, but the method by which he went about it. Previous attempts at religious satire in film has successfully been conducted, Terry Jones' Monty Python's Life of Brian, for example, which though anti-Christian, is a product of superb writing, fine acting and sharp-satire. Every director is free to express his point or opinion, if he has one. That is one of the hallmarks of movie-making: getting your point across for the world to see. This is where the director

Nakoula has gone horribly wrong. He knew he was handling a delicate topic, and we went about it in a wanton manner. If his true intention was to create a film about a fictional character named “ Master George”, why was every reference pertaining to Islam dubbed into the film later, during post-production? Why, moreover, were the actors he paid to act in his movie, completely unaware of these changes in the script? Could it be possible that if the director revealed his true intentions to the actors, he would end up with no actors to work with? After all, we live in a world where something as petty as a cartoon depiction of the Prophet can spark off riots and demonstrations, it only seems logical that a low-budget film like this one would not find too many actors willing to be involved with it. Muslim or not, anyone watching the movie can vouch for the fact that it is offensive. Besides, the video actually sat on YouTube for weeks without causing a furor. It was just another example in the long list of shoddily made movies. All that changed when it was dubbed into Arabic and posted on YouTube. It was this translation that made the video infamous and its broadcast on the Egyptian television channel Al Nas was the last straw. The cases of poor overdubbing (in the English version) are far too numerous for it to be accidental. A few examples are as follows: At 2: 53, the voiceover says “ His name is Muhammad. And we can call him The Father Unknown. ” In this case, the line is dubbed, and it appears the actor is actually saying, “ His name is George. And we can call him The Father Unknown. ” More instances of this inane dubbing are: 1: 25: The Islamic Egyptian police arrested 1400 Christians. 2: 30: His name is Mohammad. And we can call him “ the father unknown. ” 3: 03: Mohammad! Mohammad the bastard! Your lady summons you! 5: 14: I’ll

help you, Khadija. I'll make a book for him. It will be a mix of some version from the Torah, and some versions from the New Testament, and mix them into false verses. 6: 30: Mohammad is Allah [sic] messenger, and the Koran is our constitution! 8: 25: [not dubbed] It is not enough to believe in one God. [dubbed] You must say " God and Mohammad, his messenger. " Now, go read the Koran. 9: 04: Is your Mohammad a child molester? 10: 27: ...[not dubbed] And in all my young life [dubbed] I have not seen such a murderous thug as Mohammad. What is even more disturbing, is that the 80 or so cast and crew members were seemingly unaware of any of the Muslim connections in the film. Some actors were brave enough to speak out in protest, risking danger upon themselves and their families in the process, while some others have spoken up anonymously. One actor said that it was shocking to be a part of " something so dirty and disgusting", and that the film was " defamatory". To quote some of the actresses who did come out into the limelight, I will have to resort to online newspaper reports. (I tried to get in touch with three different actresses, and sent them all mails requesting an interview, but none responded, unfortunately. I was hoping to add some credibility to my paper with one-on-one interviews, but that was not possible.). Cindy Lee Garcia, plays the mother of the 12 year old daughter who was to be betrothed to Muhammad, was the first actress to speak out. One of her lines in the trailer has been tampered with, as she tells The Hollywood Reporter, " The actors were deceived. My voice was dubbed, and it wasn't even my voice. I had no idea he did that until the trailer came out. My only part was the role of a mother talking to her husband, her daughter and this man named Master George. I have the full script of what I

said. They were saying, " Praise God, praise God," because my daughter was going to be given in marriage to this man called Master George by my husband, so I mocked him for worshipping this man. They dubbed " Master George" to say ' Muhammad." " When asked when the last time she spoke to Sam Bacile, the director, was, she claims, I called him the morning that all this violence broke out in Libya and asked him, " Why did you do this?" He said, " Cindy, tell the world that you're innocent." He said to say that he's the writer and he did it because he's tired of radical Muslims attacking innocent people and that he was from Israel. But when I was down there doing the movie, he said he was from Egypt. " In response to what she thought the movie was about when she signed on for it, says Garcia, " When I went in for the casting call they told me it was an action film taking place 2, 000 years ago in the desert. There were soldiers, fighting, and Master George who had a wife who betrayed him and they killed her. All that took place. I saw it. But there was no mention of Muhammad -- just this Master George who was the big cheese. " Another actress, young Lily Dionne, says that she feels " betrayed" by the filmmaker, who turned a low-budget movie with a threadbare plot into an Anti-Islam film that provoked outrage, with violent results. She was overwhelmed by the news of the Libya attacks, claiming to CNN " I was shaking when I found out. I had no idea. This was a movie I thought no one would ever see. " During the production of the film, Dionne said that the cast and crew had several questions regarding the plot, which were never answered. " We did wonder what it was about. They kept saying ' George'. And we were like, ' This is Middle East 2000 years ago. Who's George?'", she said. " He knew what he was doing; he was playing us all

along. " pronounced the young actress. Finally, one of the most publicized speak-outs is the case of 21 year old Georgian actress, Anna Gurji. She reached out to an unexpected fiend to tell her side of the story: Sandman creator and famous author Neil Gaiman. Gaiman explains on his blog how they met for the first time online, and then at the table-read for an upcoming movie called Blood Kiss. He then goes on to share her email to him, which explained her part in the controversial issue without the manipulation of the media. Gaiman, who has always been an advocate for free speech and creative expression, felt that the use of his blog as an outlet for her story was fitting. An excerpt of her email follows, with gaps which I have left out (...): A year ago, in the summer of 2011, I submitted my materials to various projects on the Explore Talent web-site. I received a call from the casting director of the movie " Desert Warrior", and my audition date was scheduled. I auditioned for the role of Hilary. Several days later, I was informed that I got a callback. I did the callback. Several days later, I was informed that I landed the role of Hilary in the movie called " Desert Warrior". ... My character Hilary was a young girl who is sold (against her own free will) by her parents to a tribe leader known as GEORGE. She is one of his (most likely, the youngest) brides in the movie. The film was about a comet falling into a desert and different tribes in ancient Egypt fighting to acquire it for they deemed that the comet possessed some supernatural powers. The movie that we were doing in Duarte was called " Desert Warrior" and it was a fictional adventure drama. The character GEORGE was a leader of one of those tribes fighting for the comet. There was no mention EVER by anyone of MUHAMMAD and no mention of religion during the entire time I was on the

set. I am hundred percent certain nobody in the cast and nobody in the US artistic side of the crew knew what was really planned for this “ Desert Warrior”. I had interactions with the man known as Sam Bassil on the set. He was very amiable, respectful, soft-spoken, always making sure that the filming was running smoothly and everyone was satisfied. He even told me the premiere of the movie was going to happen sometime soon and I would get a good amount of tickets to invite my friends and family. ... Two hours after I found out everything that had happened I gave Inside Edition an interview, the duration of which I could not stop crying. I feel shattered. People who were tricked into believing that we were making an adventure drama about a comet falling into a desert did nothing but take part in a low budget indie feature film called the “ Desert Warrior” that WAS about a comet falling into a desert and tribes in ancient Egypt fighting to acquire it. It’s painful to see how our faces were used to create something so atrocious without us knowing anything about it at all. It’s painful to see people being offended with the movie that used our faces to deliver lines (it’s obvious the movie was dubbed) that we were never informed of, it is painful to see people getting killed for this same movie, it is painful to hear people blame us when we did nothing but perform our art in the fictional adventure movie that was about a comet falling into a desert and tribes in ancient Egypt fighting to acquire it, it’s painful to be thought to be someone else when you are a completely different person. ... I don’t know what else to do but speak the truth. I will not go into hiding (since I have nothing to hide), because if we don’t speak the truth, there is no world worth living for. ... Growing up in a family that was extremely open-minded and respectful to all the

differences in the world (all the religions) and growing up peacefully with people with so many different religions around me, it is devastating for me to have my face put into something that is completely opposite of what I believe in. I want to send my condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives. Everything happens for a reason, they say. I believe this is a trap of evil to separate us from our humanity. We must stay strong and not forget that violence has not been able to get us anywhere spiritually and has not been able to make the world a better place. Understanding and love will. Anna Gurji's account therefore goes to show the true nature of the director, and how he had pulled wool over the eyes of all the actors involved in his own production. There are cases of censorship which, in my humble opinion, deserve the sentence they receive, this being one of them.

Regardless of the moralistic tussles over YouTube denying people the right to information by banning the video and taking it offline, I feel that the censorship of the video has been justified. It left a bitter taste in even my mouth, and I am a person of very liberal inclinations when it comes to religion. It is possible to dramatize the life and times of Muhammad, in a respectful way, as with the example of Channel 4's documentary on the origins of Islam. It was everything that the Muhammad trailer was not. Tom Holland presented a thoughtful and balanced film on the arguments among historians about whether the armies that exploded out of Arabia to conquer the Persian Empire and much of the Byzantine Empire were Muslim, or whether Islam came later. His documentary was public service television at its most scrupulous. Nevertheless, Holland and Channel 4 had the conviction it requires to break a taboo that more frightened broadcasters are too

cowardly to challenge. They aired doubts about Islam's founding myths, and the predictable fulminations from the Muslim community followed. But those reactions were not nearly as violent as the ones in response to “ The Innocence of Muslims”. It is difficult to deny the relationship between the systematic discrimination of Muslims and the stigmatization of Islam and the overreaction of the Muslim community to offensive jokes, or films, or cartoons. Seen in a broader sense, the protests following the video were not simply against the film- they were about the totality of ways in which the Muslims have felt humiliated over the decades. It is merely a message of frustration and humiliation coming from particular sections of the Arab and Muslim world, not its totality. These feelings cannot be written off as mere “ clashes of culture”. Just as important as the right to free speech and the right to make terrible movies is, it is equally as important to pause and think about the conditions which have rendered such a mass dehumanization of a particular group of people. Artistic license is a very huge responsibility, and if not handled with care and dignity can often lead to disaster. It baffles me to even conjecture what must have been going through Nakoula Basseley Nakoula’s head when he decided to go about directing such a movie. Did he actually expect to be lauded, appreciated, or congratulated for his efforts? Or was his intention to rile up the Muslim sentiments, since he apparently told Cindy Lee Garcia, the actress, that he’s tired of radical Muslims attacking innocent people? Since he has gone into hiding, and has flatly denied making the movie, perhaps we shall never know. *****

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