

The Use of Silencing Rhetoric in Today's Conversations

We have observed a disconcerting trend in our conversations. People are struggling to find the confidence to express their opinions with others. Whether sharing an unpopular opinion or offering some sincere advice we are finding a growing resistance. In a broader sense we are witnessing a highly intolerant set of discourses sweeping through our societies. Those who 'go against the grain', may find themselves alienated and outcast, and often labelled and defamed.

I find the term "silencing rhetoric" to be appropriate in this article as you will find that these labels alter the course of the conversation and many people would either elect to remain quiet after being exposed to this, or fall into a new argument, such as whether or not they are a selling-out or being bigoted for example.

Verbal expression is one of humanity's great strengths. It is one of the most useful gifts from Allah, He says in the Holy Qur'an:

الرَّحْمَنُ ﴿١﴾ عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ ﴿٢﴾ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ ﴿٣﴾ عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ﴿٤﴾ (سورة الرحمن)

"The Most Merciful (Allaah), taught the Qur'an, created the human being, taught him clear expression." (The Holy Qur'an 55: 1-4)

Throughout the ages people utilized verbal expression through a range of spoken languages and imagery to convey thoughts, ideas and beliefs in a range of mediums (debate, poetry, song, article, books, pictures, etc).

Allaah granted us the ability to utilise this skill and gave us guidelines to ensure its proper use. Our beloved Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم (peace and blessings upon him) said:

إن الله كتب الإحسان على كل شيء - صحيح مسلم

Allaah has prescribed Ihsan (excellence in action, or a best practice approach) upon everything – Hadith: Sahih Muslim

The object of this article is not to encourage hurtful comments, or speech that incites the causing of harm. Rather it is to encourage respectful, open discussion in relation to what is on the minds of the people and the movement towards a best-practice approach in conversation.

This is important for all members of the discussion, with the initiator having the

important role of setting the tone. For this reason, he or she must employ certain controls to promote an environment of openness, including respecting the rights of the other and affording them the time and space to communicate their point of view.

Some of the guidance from the Quran and Sunnah on the topic of communication for effective speech is listed below:

English translation

Arabic quote

Allaah dislikes obscenity and obscene speech - Hadith: Sahih Muslim

إن الله لا يحب الفحش والتفحش - صحيح مسلم

A good word is charity (i.e of similar effect and reward) – Hadith: Sahih Al Bukhari

الكلمة الطيبة صدقة - صحيح البخاري

And do not backbite against one another – Al Qur'an 49:12

((وَلَا يَغْتَابَ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا)) - سورة الحجرات: 12

And let your argument with them be in a way that is better – Al Qur'an 16:125

((وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ)) - سورة النحل: 125

Be gracious, enjoin/command goodness (not just encourage people to be good, but also express the encouragement in a good manner) and turn away from those who act ignorantly. – Al Qur'an 7:199

((خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ)) - سورة الأعراف: 199

If accosted by those without knowledge, they speak peacefully. – Al Qur'an 25:63

وَإِذَا خَاطَبَهُمُ الْجَاهِلُونَ قَالُوا سَلَامًا - سورة الفرقان: 63

Interestingly the use of silencing rhetoric does not only occur in the realm of politics. It is just as prevalent in our day-to-day communication and is used broadly.

Sometimes a person may use silencing or negative rhetoric upon themselves. We teach people not to say, "I can't", as it gets in the way of their progress and assumes an inability to achieve. In the same fashion, using silencing rhetoric with others is

also limiting.

In the table below you'll find some examples of silencing rhetoric:

Stupid	Accusations of diverging from 'the tribe'
A hater	Insane
Offensive	Radical
Bigot	Conspiracy theorist
Racist	Judging
Sexist	Any label that sits in opposition to the 'mainstream'
Phobic	Sell-out
Ethnic labels	Othering

Please note: These statements are only mentioned here as examples of silencing rhetoric.

Silencing rhetoric was used historically against the prophets of God عليهم الصلاة والسلام (may the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon them all). The disbelievers would label some as insane, soothsayers, fabricators, 'a nobody who can barely express himself'. Threats of violence were made and acted upon against them. Their opponents often resorted to defamatory labels and violence rather than respectful discussion and debate.

Is there a place for negative rhetoric in our conversations?

Negative rhetoric can lead to positive results only when there is meaning behind it, allows elaboration, and leaves room for refutation and debate. Therefore, a more appropriate question is: can a person benefit from the negative rhetoric of others?

If you find yourself a recipient of silencing or negative rhetoric, here are some tips:

- Remember your initial point and stick with it. Negative rhetoric is often used to change the subject or derail an argument.
- Pointing out double standards in the sender can often be quite effective. A person may on the one hand accuse someone of judging them on a matter while on the other hand may freely use labels on others, such as conspiracy theorist, offensive, radical, etc.
- Try to find the benefit in the comment, despite how difficult or hurtful it may be to hear. The person making the comment may be a poor communicator, but you

can try to look past that to see if there is anything you can take away from the message.

If you feel a particular opinion or behaviour needs to be called out, here are a few tips:

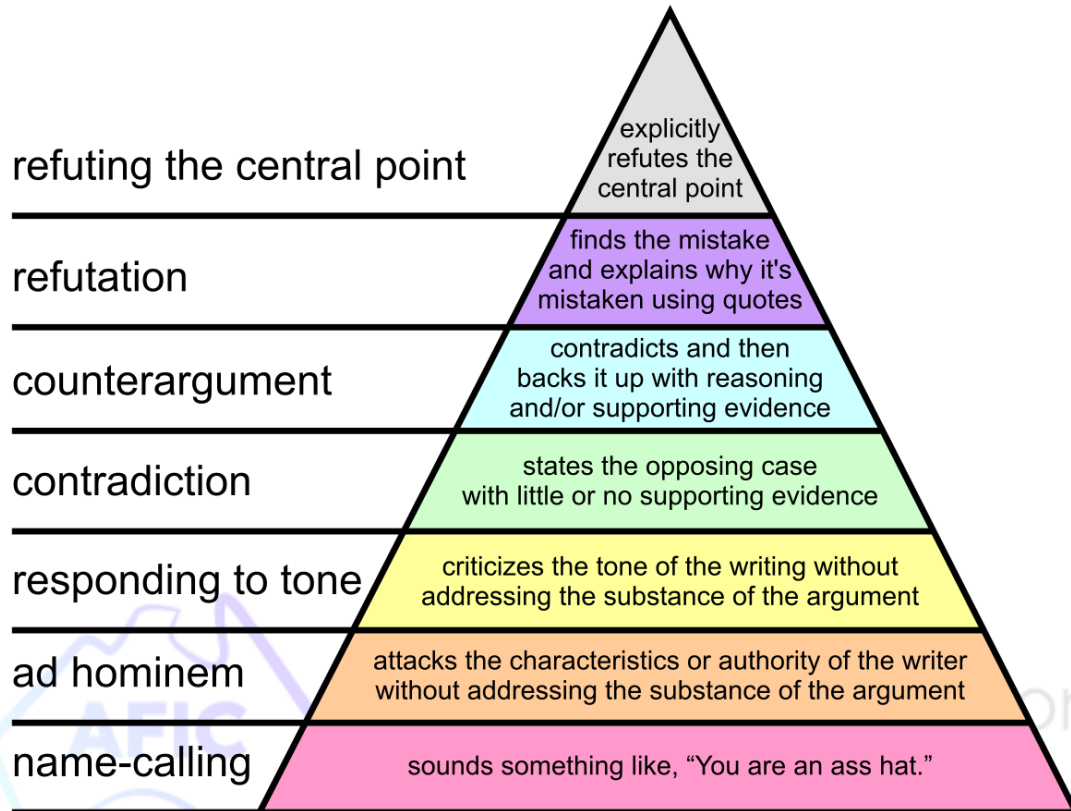
- In many instances, you will find it more effective and appropriate to create distance between the recipient and the identified problem behaviour. “You’re behaving like a bully”, is more appropriate than “you’re a bully”. The difference is subtle yet significant. You are trying to help them improve after all.
- Consider what the problem behaviour really is rather than trying to identify whether you can give them a particular label. This is more constructive and has the potential to help the person change.
- Try to understand the position of the recipient of the comment before deciding to make the comment. You may wrongly label the person an innovator in the faith (adding to, changing, or removing from the rulings of Islam), while there may be a great difference between your level of learning and their level, and they may well know something you do not.
- There is often more harm in adopting a negative, unsubstantiated view of someone than there is in adopting a positive, unsubstantiated view.

Opinions, beliefs, Arguments

What is taboo is a matter of opinion, you will find that all people will identify at least something they would consider off-limits to discussion or consideration. Ironically, this differs from one society to another. Without tolerance and respect, this difference can be a catalyst for hate and suspicion. Silencing discussion for fear of offence leaves potentially dangerous ideas to linger and generate greater fear, division and potential violence. The different and sometimes conflicting taboos across societies show that people have the capacity to adapt to different standards, that socially constructed standards are not absolute and no culture (or group) can claim a monopoly on having the “right” standards. Democratic societies shift and change absolutes over time, if studied across generations, it might appear like a pendulum swinging from one spectrum to the opposite spectrum and finding great difficulty to establish a middle ground.

A resilient argument holds up well to scrutiny, whereas an argument built on weak foundation is threatened by it. English author and computer scientist Paul Graham has given readers a very constructive ‘disagreement hierarchy’, illustrating the lowest

form of disagreement at the bottom of the pyramid (name calling) and the highest at the top (dealing with the central point).



Paul Graham's Hierarchy of Disagreement

The next time you see a disagreement, especially a disagreement that dominates public discourse, check to see where the supporters and opponents fit in the diagram. How many would you place in the upper section of the diagram? Where do you think the use of silencing rhetoric and negative rhetoric falls in this diagram?

When is it time to step away from a disagreement?

The general principal in Islam is to walk away from an argument when it is no longer helpful. The Qur'an and hadith give us guidance in this regard:

And indeed, we or you are either upon guidance or in clear error – Al Qur'an 34:24

وَإِنَّا أَوْ إِيَّاكُمْ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًى أَوْ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ – سورة الأعراف: 24

The prophet Muhammad, صلى الله عليه وسلم (peace and blessings upon him), tells us to avoid circular or pointless argumentation wherever possible:

I guarantee a home in Paradise for whoever leaves pointless argumentation even when he is in the right, and a home in the middle of paradise for whoever does not resort to lies even when joking and in the highest part of paradise to the one who beautifies his character – Hadith: Sunan Abi Dawud

قال رسول الله ﷺ: أنا زعيم ببيت في ربض الجنة لمن ترك المراء وإن كان محققاً، وبيت في وسط الجنة لمن ترك الكذب وإن كان مازحاً، وبيت في أعلى الجنة لمن حسن خلقه، - سنن أبي داود

Conclusion

إن شاء الله (God-willing) this article contributes to the promotion of open, beneficial discussion which enriches all parties involved and leaves them feeling that their voice has been heard and their opinion considered. Our aim in a discussion or disagreement is to arrive at the truth, approaching disagreements with this in mind will help us to do that. Imam Al Shafi'i is a great representation of this, as upon entering a dispute he would make the supplication "O Allah present the truth upon the tongue of my opponent". This shows that arriving at the truth was more important to him than winning the argument. It is also significant to note that for all sides of a discussion, it is important to understand that it is okay to think on something before making a decision or adopting an opinion. استعجال (Hastiness in taking a position) is often not a good quality.

Imam Mohammad Trad AFIC
Da'wa and Iftaa Manager.

Authorised by
Dr Rateb Jneid
President