Mill's On Liberty

Allow me a brief disclosure about myself: I am an ardent proponent of freedom of speech and expression. This stems back to my high school reading of John Stuart Mill's arguments in "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion" which is chapter two of his book On Liberty. I agree with Mill that it is a moral and a practical error to impose censorship on unpopular opinions, even if they are extreme and offensive to the majority, even if the rest of us are certain that they are false. Mill give four types of arguments in defense of strong free thought and speech. They are;

1. Suppressed opinions may be true. To deny this possibility is to assume that we are infallible – and we know that none of us are infallible. "To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure that it is false, is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility." (On Liberty, Ch.II).

2. A suppressed opinion may be partly true, and that truth can only be added to the partly true accepted opinion if there is a possibility of open discussion.

3. If an accepted opinion is true but not discussed, it will degenerate into mere prejudice with little recognition of its grounds. In order to appreciate the meaning of a true belief, we need not only the statement of it but also the reasons for it. Those reasons arise out of the debate over the true and the false. Censor the false and we eliminate the context in which the reasons for the true come clear.

4. An undiscussed true opinion is in danger of losing its meaning and relevance. "However true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth." (On Liberty, Ch.II).

Please note that it is not merely for the sake of those with the extreme views that Mill argues for liberty of thought and speech. Rather (in characteristic Utilitarian fashion) he argues that free expression of extreme, false, and unpopular views is to the benefit of the moderate, true, and accepted views. In other words, the censorship of the ideas of our opponents will do harm to our own most cherished beliefs.

Mill's position is not moral relativism. He is not saying that other's views must be true just because they believe them, or anything of the sort. He asserts plainly that some opinions are false and some are immoral. Still, even the false and immoral opinions are to be protected from censorship, because;
"the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error." (On Liberty, Ch.II).

This is a dynamite argument, because people who argue in favor of some forms of censorship (i.e. government making it illegal to express certain opinions) typically do so by pointing put the harms that the expression of some opinion has to society or some of its members. In his argument, Mill has effectively trumped such appeals to harm by citing the general harm that censorship has to all members of society and the accepted truths of that society. "On Liberty" is a masterpiece of argumentation, philosophical reasoning, and political influence. Mill's ideas and the general topic of civil rights and free speech are critical today when the pressure to limit such liberties in the United States is greater than almost any time in its history.[1]

Please note one important implication of Mill's arguments: Free-Speech is only meaningful in a context where people purposefully exercise that right. Even false, foolish, and uncomfortable opinions must be protected because it is by the opposition of the true to the false that we are able to detect error and exchange error for truth. If we ban false (or insulting, unpleasant, etc.) opinions by policy, then we undermine the ability to discover truth. But this will only work if there is sufficient participation (i.e. your participation) in the *marketplace of ideas*.

You see, this argument is not based on Mill's sentiments or political preferences. He is making a logical argument based on what Truth is and how the discovery of truth works. Think of that: error is necessary for the perception of truth. Your opinions explicitly stated are crucial to the continuance of truth finding. If you intend to be more on the side of truth than error in this, then you must commit to a process of reasoned analysis applied to your own ideas (and certainly of those which you receive from others).

A few years back I was in Yemen for a month. That was a life-changing experience. I met with a class of about 100 students at the University of Taiz for three hours. Those students had some very challenging questions for me. One fellow asked; "Is it true that in USA you can say anything at all?" I answered that in a way this is true. Most Americans value free speech. I told them about Mill's arguments (and I told them that reading On Liberty would give them one of the best pictures of how Westerner's think). I explained Mill's Harm Principle; "That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."

I asked them if they knew about the issues over blasphemous cartoons in Denmark. They all knew about it. In 2005 a Danish newspaper ran a contest soliciting cartoons using the prophet Muhammad.[2] In modern Islam it is blasphemy to make images of religious figures.[3] Some Danish Muslims rioted and tensions were very high. I explained that from a Western perspective (on average, anyway) there is not sufficient harm in an insult to violate Mill's principle. Rioting and violence, on the other hand are harms. A cartoon cannot harm God and the anger that the faithful feel at having their faith insulted is not fully a harm; it may be hurtful, but it is not harm. So, I told them, it is difficult for many of us to understand how drawing a cartoon or making a movie could possibly justify killing the cartoonist or film maker. Instead, I explained, we tend to value the idea that the truth of an idea - including a faith - can be victorious over blasphemy and insult because it is true and because the faithful openly and consistency express it. I am not sure how they received my lecture on that issue. Still it was one of the most challenging and rewarding lectures and discussions I have had. You may be interested in how Muslim-

Americans think about these issues. Here is an interesting article on just that. [4]

Notes

[1] For a contemporary look at US opinions about free speech, particularly book banning, consider the following Harris Poll report. *Caution: this report is specifically about words and books that some people find highly objectionable. Be aware that if you read this, you will encounter those words. I am not requiring this text for the course, but making it available because it is current and pertinent. Don't read it if you are very sensitive to negative language. I am not out to shock or upset anyone. I'll be glad to receive your reactions and discuss this with you.
http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/HI-Harris-Poll-Book-Censorship-2011-04-12.pdf

[2] If you don't know about this, which is still going on, read about it here:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy

[3] If that idea seems very odd to you, consider the 2nd of the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus; "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." An idol is a representation, whether in sculpture, painting, drawing, etc. The religious taboo on graphic representation is not exclusive.

[4] Muslim-Americans defend free speech, despite blasphemous' cartoons
http://www.whymuhammad.com/de/Contents.aspx?AID=3636