

The Muhammad Cartoons

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As most people know, in January and February Muslims demonstrated in many countries over the publication of satirical cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in European newspapers. The cartoons showed the prophet in a variety of ways meant to satirize him and Muslim belief, for example, with bombs in his head covering. They were first published in a Danish newspaper last September and then, when demonstrations began, were republished by a sizeable number of other European newspapers acting in support of the first. Some of the demonstrations drew tens of thousands of people. Some have involved mob violence—attacks on Danish embassies, deaths from police gunfire—while others have featured symbolic destruction such as flag burning but overall were relatively peaceful. It's not my purpose to give a review of the events but to state a point of view.

It should go without saying that governments should not ban newspapers or prosecute editors for printing the cartoons, as has happened in Russia, among some other places. But in my view that's not the main issue.

According to one of the “experts” the *New York Times* loves to quote, a professor of European history at Oxford, “The clash has pitted two sets of values—freedom of expression and multiculturalism—against each other” (Alan Cowell, “West Coming to Grasp Wide Islamic Protests as Sign of Deep Gulf,” *New York Times* Feb. 8, 2006, A10). That is exactly the opposition that should never occur. I'm not talking law or constitutional principle here, but morality and decency. People may possess freedom of expression and still decide what they will express and not express. To ridicule other people's religious sensibilities is disgusting and reprehensible. The matter is as simple as that. The occurrence of this so-called division between “two sets of values” is evidence of two things. One is the almost universal ignorance and/or disrespect in the west about basic Muslim beliefs and values. Thus, most westerners either do not know or do not care that satirical images of the prophet are deeply offensive to most Muslims. Portraying the prophet is not absolutely forbidden in Islam; as Holland Cotter, the *New York Times* art critic and someone who knows as much about Islamic art as anyone writing in the news media, notes in a recent article, “Images of the Prophet abound in Islamic art and culture; the Metropolitan Museum has several examples in its Islamic collection. But unlike the cartoons, such images are not caricatures” (Feb.26, 2006). However, many people's attitudes to Muslims' sensibilities on this point vary between something like “Suck it up” and a cavalier assumption that Muslims

should acquire “western values” in which such matters would be less important. These attitudes themselves are deeply condescending and in some cases outright hostile.

The Danish prime minister self-servingly claimed in an inter-view Feb. 9 that the cartoons had angered Muslim “extremists,” but in fact they offended mainstream Muslims just as much. Of course, countries such as Syria and Iraq have been exploiting Muslims’ anger over the cartoons for their own political purposes. That does not change the fact that the -anger is widespread, deeply felt, and legitimate.

The second point is the ignorant or bigoted readiness of many in the west to blur the distinction between terrorism as a political tactic and philosophy and Islam as a religion—a readiness which, in my view, in Europe owes a good deal to traditional Christian religious prejudice, to social prejudice against disproportionately lower-class outsiders, and, above all, to Eurocentric cultural smugness and narrowmindedness. The U.S. has not much to be proud of in these respects and yet anti-Muslim bias is not so open here as in much of Europe.

Some defenders of the cartoons have argued that Arabic newspapers have featured cartoons of hook-nosed, child-devouring Jews, have printed the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, etc. That of course is true, but I wonder if those defenders of the cartoons are really admitting, “We are as bigoted as you are.” Rather, I think they are saying, “Your anti-Semitic bigotry shows that Islam is, after all, a religion of hate, and therefore the cartoons were accurate.” And this conceptions hews the same deep and self-willed ignorance about Islam that I have already mentioned.

As a young man, I spent a year living in coastal East Africa. There, I learned to see veiled women simply as women leading a long-established cultural way of life, and to hear the early dawn calls of the muezzins as expressing not some eastern exoticism but simply one of humanity’s many ways of conceptualizing the infinite. That experience helped me, an atheist, develop as someone who respects and values the varied religious sensibilities by which most of the world’s people order their lives and confront the unsolvable riddles of life’s beginning, passage, and end. Hence, I am in sympathy with the majority of the world’s Muslims who are offended to their depths by the bigoted cartoons that some are mistakenly defending.

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