

[COMMENTARY]**Muslims, Cartoons and Freedom of Expression**

by
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The cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and later re-printed in elsewhere have created outrage among Muslims around the world. The defense for the publication of these offensive cartoons is presented as a case of "freedom of expression." There is no doubt that freedom of expression is of great value and should be respected thoroughly. At the same time such publications have increased fury among people. As we have seen via the media, Muslims all around the world have boycotted Danish products and have often threatened violence in their frustration and anger. In some instances, violence has occurred. Islam has a great respect for freedom of expression and free society, although it always regarded freedom as limited by the freedom of others. An absolute freedom is only found in the jungles among animals. We don't live in a jungle—we live in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society and freedom of others includes a respect for the faith, tradition, property, and personal dignity of people.

One should remember that prior to the Holocaust, Jews were depicted negatively in cartoons in many Western newspapers. Just as these negative portrayals desensitized many Europeans to the suffering of their human fellows, likewise the recent cartoons are fueling the fire of Islamophobia in Europe. As the recent Zaman article suggested (March 6, 2006) the Danish newspaper was one of the supporters of Hitler 1930s.

The cartoons that depict the Prophet Muhammad in a negative image have offended the faith of Muslims not only in Denmark, but all over the world. In fact, these cartoons have offended people of faith from many traditions, particularly Judaism and Christianity. Rabbi Joseph Sitruk, head of the Jewish community of France, who said "I share the outrage of Muslims and I don't approve these cartoons." Sharing Muslims' concerns Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, a retired Vatican diplomat, said, "Freedom of satire that offends the feelings of others becomes an abuse." The leaders of religious communities in Turkey including the head of United Catholic Church's Fr. George Marowich, the spiritual leader of Orthodox Church Patriarch Bartholomew, and the head of Armenian Church, Mesrob II have condemned such a disrespect for the Prophet of Islam by saying, "We pray with our Muslim brothers for divine love on earth."

Why are Muslims outraged? Belief in Muhammad's prophethood is the foundation of religion in Islam. He is the spiritual master of thousands of Muslim saints. He has been the educator of the spirits of millions upon millions of Muslims for 1,400 years. Although Muslims do not regard him as a deity and do not worship him, God refers to him as a perfect example for all Muslims: "Surely, there is a beautiful example for you in the messenger of God" (Qur'an). It also describes him as a man of perfect ethics, "of high moral excellence" (Qur'an). Furthermore, in every daily prayer Muslims praise God and ask God to send His blessings on Muhammad. Every daily prayer is a reassurance of allegiance to the message of the Prophet. Sufis of Islam have special daily devotion to the messenger of God, asking God for peace and blessings. Despite this Qur'anic praise for the Prophet, the Qur'an, in many verses, recounts that Muhammad and Messengers before him were mocked (6:10). Another verse comforts the Prophet: "We will ourselves sustain you against those who mock you" (15:95). One should remember that such pejorative cartoons mock the faith of all devout Muslims, and no one should have the right to do that.

Since the beginning of Islam, Muslims have always shown a great respect for the Prophet. His own companions, when they addressed him, would say, using the highest respectful address in the Arabic language, "My father and my mother be sacrificed to you O Messenger of God." Even today, when Muslims speak of the Prophet, they make sure to say "Peace and blessings be upon him," not only for Muhammad, but also for other prophets, such as Moses and Jesus. Therefore any negative hint at the Prophet's personality is a great offense to Muslims and their faith. Without Muhammad there is no Islam. It is the Prophet who brought the message of the Qur'an. Therefore, the issue should not be considered as a matter of freedom of expression, but should be looked at in light of whether we have the right to transgress and demonize the religion of others.

The content of the caricature is perjury. It is based on false assumptions and unreliable references about Islam and its Prophet. It is not a matter of making a joke, but is a matter of giving misinformation in a pejorative way.

As far as the reaction of Muslims is concerned, they should respect the Qur'anic principle that "no one carries the burden of another." All Muslims are not terrorists, and all Danes are not anti-Islam and its Prophet. The Qur'an clearly says that one should not respond to an ugly action in an ugly way. Muslims must be more sensitive in their response to these cartoons because they are not indicative of the feelings of all Europeans towards Islam. Muslims should not allow these images to provoke them into violence that would negate the

true image of Islam.

Today, more than any time, we need a dialogue between religions and civilizations. Unfortunately, not all Muslims are informed of the details of Western societies and cultures. Because of this Muslims around the world do not see a Danish newspaper as merely a newspaper published in Denmark. They see it as a newspaper published in Europe, a predominantly Christian continent—as a Christian blow to Islam. Muslims should be calm, and Westerners should be more sensitive to the faith of Muslims.

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