



# Cartoons of Muhammad: Free Speech or Sacrilegious Offense?

The Danish cartoon caricature crisis—precipitated by the September 30, 2005, publication in *Jyllands-Posten* of twelve cartoons, one depicting the Prophet Muhammad with a turban shaped like a bomb—appears to non-Muslims as a battle between “free speech” and its enemy, narrow-minded religious bigotry.

Suppose we formulate the question this way: *in the battle between the modern Enlightenment value of free speech versus premodern narrow-mindedness and religious bigotry, what should win?* The answer is obvious: free speech should win. And, we should be grateful to our knights in shining armor—President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—who are asking Muslim leaders to quell the protests in their countries and crush the violence.

Now, one gets a different answer when one changes the question. Suppose we reformulate the question this way: *how do Muslims look at the controversy, and what is important to them?* The answer here is this: what Muslims find important is respect, both self-respect and respect from others. Through the eyes of a Muslim, the cartoons communicate disdain and disrespect for what is sacred within Islam, and Washington’s disregard for the trampled-on sensibilities of Muslims is like pouring gasoline under a lit match.

Now, I categorically embrace free speech without compromise. I do not believe we should yield to demands to punish the cartoonists. Instead, I recommend we should ignore the cartoonists—and their cartoons as well. What’s done is done. Let’s look to the future—or at least to what comes next.

It appears to me that free speech is not threatened here. It does not need defense, in my judgment. Mounting

a self-righteous defense of freedom of the press at this point could be a diversion; it could be a misleading way to formulate the question. Defending free speech could actually function as a smoke screen to cover a more sinister Western agenda, namely, taking feeble intellectual revenge against a culture that appears to cultivate terrorism.

So, with this in mind, I would like to take a look at the second formulation of the question.

## Respecting Islam

I just returned to the United States to resume seminary teaching after spending a week and a half in Cairo, Egypt. In the Middle East, I was a guest of a number of Islamic organizations, and I met with Muslim imams, sheiks, muftis, and ayatollahs, along with Muslim medical researchers and clinical physicians. Now, one brief visit does not provide me—a Westerner—with an in-depth insight into the historically complex and nuanced religious culture of Islam. A superficial insight is the best I could come up with under these circumstances. But, in this crisis, perhaps a superficial insight is better than none. So, let me share this insight with you, granting its limitations.

Above all else, *today’s Muslims want to be respected*. The Islamic world wants the respect of the modern West, and individual Muslim persons want to be honored, welcomed, and, of course, respected for who they are.

## Reciprocal Respect

It seems to me that respect comes in two varieties. Let me call them respectfully, *respect one* and *respect two*. First, respect one is attained through reciprocity.

When reciprocity occurs, the West confers respect on the Islamic world, and, conversely, Muslims feel this respect and are able to express appropriate respect in return.

The reciprocal respect comes naturally, spontaneously, perhaps even naively. I have worked in partnership with Islamic scholars on a number of occasions. I worked with two Muslim scholars, Muzaffar Iqbal and Syed Nomanul Haq, in editing a book, *God, Life, and the Cosmos: Christian and Islamic Perspectives*. In retrospect, while working with my Muslim colleagues on this project, I worked with an automatic sense of curiosity, interest, excitement, respect, honor, and collegial affection for these scholar friends.

In a recent academic adventure in February 2006 at the World Health Organization in Cairo, I participated in a constructive project with the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences—working on theological guidelines for genetic research and reproductive technology. Again, without having to think about it, I found myself honored to be partnered with sophisticated and religiously committed persons from countries throughout the Middle East. It had not dawned on me that respect might be the issue. Then they told me. So I listened.

Once the concern for respect registered in my awareness, then I could understand better the anarchic reaction in the Islamic world to the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. *From the West's point of view, the issue is freedom of speech. From the Muslim point of view, the issue is respect.* The former is legal; the latter is cultural. Unfortunately, neither George W. Bush nor Condoleezza Rice operates with this insight. Nor does Denmark's Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who refused to meet early on with an international delegation of eleven Islamic leaders to resolve the cartoon caricature controversy. The matter could have been defused before it got out of hand, but this option was rejected. The message of Western leaders to Muslim leaders throughout the world has been restricted to defending free speech, to squashing protest, and to demanding containment of the violence. This failure to acknowledge Muslim sensibilities only exacerbates the outraged reaction to global disrespect. The policies of Copenhagen and Washington are inviting still more violence.

## Another Path to Respect: Terrorism

The second kind is respect two. If no reciprocal respect is possible, then a second means for eliciting respect stands ready, namely, resorting to the power of terror. The shedding of blood will get respect. As I was wending my way back home to North America, a diplomat told me that imams in Afghanistan mosques on Friday, February 10, told those at prayer to go out and kill one foreigner. A Taliban leader was reported by *Time* magazine (February 20, 2006) as having offered one hundred grams of gold to anyone who would kill the cartoonists. With the blood of dead foreigners flowing in the streets, the resulting sense of terror in the West will elicit respect. It will be a respect for Islamic power.

One way or another, Islam will get respect. Now, of the two options, which is the more edifying?

## Thoughtful Christians and Free Speech

Do thoughtful Christians have an investment in free speech? In modern post-Enlightenment European culture—which includes North America—free speech is a secular sacred. To trample on free speech is to provoke a potentially violent response from Westerners. Free speech is to the secular West as the Prophet Muhammad is to the Islamic world.

Not all Christians live in the post-Enlightenment West where free speech is so sacred. Many Christian believers live in the Middle East—Orthodox Christians, Coptic Christians, and such. The mindset and worldview of these branches of the Christian tree share a great deal with their Muslim neighbors. These Christians have learned over the last millennium to live at peace with their Islamic neighbors, and they are not likely to sympathize with Western Christians who defend secular values when they insult any religious traditions.

Still, in my judgment, something within the Christian faith inevitably leads us in the direction of supporting free speech. Biblical Christians believe that the gospel is the truth. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6). The truth does not need to be protected by authority, by censorship, or by threat of

reprisal. Like a fish in fresh water, the Christian gospel swims vigorously in a society of free speech. Conveying the truth of the Christian message should be open, reasonable, and persuasive without being coercive. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15). Giving good reasons for believing in the truth of Jesus Christ is what a context of free speech makes readily possible.

Christians in post-Enlightenment culture need not view free speech as a secular sacred, to be sure; yet, free speech is a value worthy of Christian support.

## Thoughtful Christians and Respect for What Is Sacred to Others

On February 4, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI spoke on the issue from the Vatican. The Holy Father said that the Danish cartoons appear blasphemous to Muslims because, first of all, Islam does not allow depictions of Muhammad and, second, the cartoons show Muhammad in a number of disrespectful ways. In this statement, the pope was placing himself in the shoes of the Muslims. Then he proceeded to say to the Christian sheep in his own flock, "freedom of thought or expression . . . cannot imply a right to offend the religious sentiments of believers," no matter what the religion. For a report, see <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0600681.htm>.

While I was at the World Health Organization in Cairo, a much-respected mufti (supreme teacher) read Benedict XVI's statement out loud. The Muslims in the room were visibly touched. The pope's understanding and kindness were deeply appreciated. Respect resulted in reconciliation.

Nothing in the commitments Christians make to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ forbids us from showing respect, care, love, or affection toward devoted members of other religious traditions. Love for one another in the form of respect for one another is a genuine expression of our faith in Jesus Christ.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Does the right to free speech represent only Western cultural values, or is free speech also a specifically Christian value? Should thoughtful Christians living in our post-Enlightenment society feel the need to defend every element of Western culture, including democracy, equality for women, free speech, rap music, MTV, Hollywood films, and such? Should thoughtful Christians support military aggression against Islamic culture in order to compel Muslims to join the modern world?
2. Shortly after the tragedy of 9/11, President George W. Bush said repeatedly to Muslims in America, "We respect your religion." If you personally know Muslims or have Muslim friends, do they report a sense that you and the rest of us in North America show sufficient respect? If we are short on respect, might you surmise just why?
3. Do you feel fear toward Muslims? If so, can you say why? Would you still feel fear even if there were no daily news reports of terrorism? Is the fear among North Americans due solely to terrorism? Or, might it be due to Islam's otherness? How do you react to Islam's self-proclaimed resistance to modern Western culture and to "infidel" religions such as Christianity?
4. Reciprocal respect between Muslims and Christians in our moment of military and cultural crisis is difficult. Yet, we have a moral obligation to express respect. And reciprocal respect entails caring for one another. Do you believe cultivating such reciprocal respect is consistent with fundamental Christian commitments? Or, do you believe showing respect for Islam compromises fundamental Christian commitments?

## About the Author

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