



The portrayal of Muhammad is not universally banned in Islam

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The uproar in Europe and some Muslim countries over cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper last September has once again dramatized several dismal aspects of the conflict between radical Islam and the culture of the West. One is that the so-called Arab or Muslim street comprises little more than a rent-a-mob available to burn, loot, and kill whenever Muslim demagogues attack political institutions and media anywhere in the world. Another is the ignorance Western media bring to their reporting on the issues that disturb the global Muslim community.

Thus, reporters and commentators have established the claim that Is-

lam strictly forbids artistic depiction of Muhammad, other prophets, and living beings in general, and that in publishing cartoons of the prophet the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* deeply offended all Muslims. Journalists have foisted this nonsense on the Western public by recycling the apologetics for radical Islam offered by Western academics enjoying the patronage of obscurantist, oil-rich Arabs.

In reality, portrayal of Muhammad is not universally banned in Islam. It is true that Islam was marked from the beginning by a horror of idol-worship, and representations of the prophet are never found in mosques, which instead are often and famously ornamented with in-

tricate nonrepresentational designs known as arabesques and hung with works of calligraphy. But the Koran itself is silent on the matter of images, and the warnings against them contained in the *hadith*, sayings of the prophet recorded centuries after he lived, have been subject to various interpretation.

Depictions of the prophet were once common, for instance, in Persian and Turkic Islamic art, although often in these pictures Muhammad's face or figure is veiled or left blank. Even before the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258, Islamic civilization came under the influence of Oriental art, with its rich tradition of human representation. And after the conquest, there was an explosion of painting and other imagery in Islam, including depictions of Muhammad.

So it is that the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington contains a picture of the prophet seated with his companions. The work appears in *Bal'ami's Persian Version of Tabari's Universal History*, from the 14th century. Another image, this one of the birth of the prophet, is found in one of the great achievements of the Islamic book, the *Jami' al-tavarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), produced at Tabriz in Iran around 1314. The painting, in ink, color, and gold, draws on Christian imagery of Jesus' birth.

A favorite subject of Islamic illustration is the Night Journey of Muhammad, an out-of-body ride on a supernatural horse and ascent into the heavens that is a key element of

Islamic theology. The prophet is shown on the magical steed Buraq, flying over Mecca, in a 15th-century manuscript, now in the British Museum, of the *Khamseh* or *Five-Poem Cycle* by Nizami Ganjavi, a poet from Azerbaijan. An even richer illuminated image appears in a Persian miniature from about a hundred years later.

In the late 18th century, the rise of the purist and intolerant Wahhabi sect, allied with the al Saud family in eastern Arabia, ushered in a new wave of iconoclasm wherever Wahhabism appeared. It saw the destruction of many famous manuscripts, books, and artistic works, including pictures of the prophet, on the argument that any depiction of living beings was idolatry. The Wahhabi-Saudi conquest of Mecca and Medina beginning in 1924, and the consolidation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, soon enriched by oil wealth, empowered the Wahhabis to spread their extremist doctrine throughout the world of Sunni Islam.

Today, much Islamic opinion holds that representation of humans and animals is forbidden to Muslims. But no firm and universal rule on these issues has been enunciated. Shia Muslims often keep pictures in their homes of the prophet as well as Ali, the fourth caliph, or successor to Muhammad as leader of the faithful, and Hussein, the prophet's grandson. The deaths of Ali and Hussein mark the beginning of the Shia tradition.

Islam, of course, is not alone in finding the depiction of living beings a matter for debate. Orthodox Judaism and some Christian sects understand the Bible to forbid images. The second of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4) has been variously rendered in English, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (King James Version) and "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (New International Version)--to cite just two translations--clearly leaving room for differing views.

THE DANISH CARICATURES themselves were mainly innocuous. The only one that could be considered genuinely provocative showed the prophet wearing a turban shaped like a bomb with a burning fuse. Once certain (emphasis on "certain") Muslims claimed the work of the artists was offensive to all believers in the religion, a series of absurd and tragic events ensued. Danish Islamic clerics traveled to Muslim countries to organize a protest, taking with them not only the published cartoons but also gross images, including one of a man wearing a pig's snout that they passed off as a derisive image of Muhammad.

Some European newspapers republished the cartoons; but *Jyllands-Posten* apologized for offending any Muslim readers. The paper's editor, Carsten Juste, concluded, "In our

opinion, the 12 drawings were sober. They were not intended to be offensive, nor were they at variance with Danish law, but they have indisputably offended many Muslims, for which we apologize." Riots were triggered in various Muslim countries, Danish and other diplomatic offices were attacked, and people have been killed.

But the Western habit of apology and self-abasement proved contagious, as even American politicians offered ridiculous comments on the matter. Bill Clinton, a guest at a business forum in the Gulf state of Qatar, attacked the cartoons as "appalling" and compared them to anti-Jewish propaganda. Bush administration spokesman Kurtis Cooper said, "These cartoons are indeed offensive to the belief of Muslims. We all fully recognize and respect freedom of the press and expression but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious or ethnic hatreds in this manner is not acceptable." But objectionable cartoons on religious and ethnic issues are protected expression in the United States, and are not incitement. Incitement means directly urging people to kill each other, not making fun of a religious figure. Anti-Semitic and anti-Christian images proliferate in media around the world, without exceptional comment by the U.S. authorities. Obnoxious anti-Jewish images are particularly common in Arab countries, whose leaders and street agitators have no moral standing to complain about anything said or printed in the West.

Christians and Jews in America have long objected to caricatures they find insulting to Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the pope and other Catholic clerics, prominent evangelical preachers, and Israeli leaders. But they have not rioted or threatened anybody with death. Muslims must learn that they do not have a special status in the West, exempt from common standards of law and conduct. If Muslims cannot stand expressions of criticism and even disrespect for Islam in the West, they should return to live in Muslim lands. This is a well-established principle in Islamic law, as enunciated by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Iraqi Shia cleric, as well as by Sunni jurists. Sistani, let it be noted, has reacted to the cartoon dispute with exemplary calm, condemning the cartoons but also criticizing "misguided and oppressive" Muslims whose activities, he said, create "a distorted and dark image of the faith."

Furthermore, even if there were Muslim unanimity banning depiction of living beings or even of the prophet, no normal Muslim believes that such rules apply to non-Muslims. Mainstream Muslims do not claim that the rules of their religion must be followed by those outside it. Otherwise, they would try to prevent Christians and Jews living in Muslim-majority societies from drinking wine (as do the Wahhabis). Muslims do believe their revelation is the final message offered by the creator to humanity, and extremists among them use this as a pretext to deprecate Judaism and Christianity. Radical Muslims have a right to

such beliefs and expression of them in the West; but if non-Muslims cannot caricature Muhammad, how can Muslims demand protection for their right to deny that Jesus was the son of God? Radical Muslims ignore the obvious truth that banning criticism of any religion will affect them as negatively as it might others.

WHAT IS ALL this really about? Why did it take six months for Muslims to react to the cartoons? The stage-managed outburst of rage originates in two ideological issues, neither of which has any real foundation in Islam as a religion. The first is that the complaining Muslims are summoned to violence by representatives of the Saudi-financed Wahhabi sect, which hates all representation of living beings, just as it hates graveyards, historic mosques, and other objects it claims will induce Muslims to commit *shirk*, or idol-worship. The Saudis are currently engaged in extensive vandalism of ancient Islamic architecture on their own territory; recently they demolished five ancient mosques in Medina, including one built by Fatima, the prophet's daughter.

The same destructive attitude was revealed in the destruction of the colossal pre-Islamic Buddha statues at Bamiyan, in Afghanistan, by the Taliban and al Qaeda in the spring of 2001. At that time, a variety of bought-off Western "experts" tried to explain away the vandalism by citing the alleged Islamic ban on images. But the governments of other Muslim countries--including the ultra-radical Shia regime in Iran-

-have never embarked on the destruction of their pre-Islamic architectural and artistic heritage. Can we imagine the Egyptian government devastating the treasures of Pharaonic art and monumental statuary on the grounds that they are un-Islamic? Will they blow up the Sphinx?

Although more sinister, the aim of intimidating Westerners into silence about any aspect of Islam by this outbreak of fanaticism and brutality is actually secondary. The third and worst piece of the puzzle is an obvious effort to maintain control over the most backward and marginal elements of the Islamic community, especially those living in the West, so that the benighted outlook of Saudi-financed Wahhabism will go

unchallenged among those who represent the greatest threat to Islamic extremism: moderate Muslims.

The Wahhabis have, in great part, attained their goals in this scandalous affair. Western politicians and media have cowered, and Saudi-funded pressure groups like the Council on American-Islamic Relations may now congratulate themselves on administering a lesson in bogus sensitivity to non-Muslim media and governments. But those who defend the censorship on the basis of a false knowledge of Islam should be asked: Is the faith of more than a billion people really so weak that it is threatened by a few cartoons?