

Reflections

"Reflections" is an occasional section of Interreligious Insight. Pieces come from various traditions, drawing on different sources to unfold an important theme in spirituality and interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement.

On the Cartoons Fiasco

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He is the one who created you male and female and divided you into sects and tribes so you will have a chance to know one another. Verily the best among you is the one who is most God-centered. (Qur'an, Chapter 49, verse 13)

I had intended to sit this one out. But the silly, slapstick war over a bunch of inane cartoons (that makes the Salman Rushdie debacle look like a Greek tragedy by comparison) is refusing to go away. I have tried to avert my eyes from this global train wreck. And I have prayed with Soren Kierkegaard, the greatest Dane who ever lived: *Lord, give us weak eyes; For things of little worth.*

All to no avail. We all know what happened. A rightwing Danish newspaper lampooned the faith of one fifth of the world's population on a reckless dare and then feigned shock that those "sober" cartoons that were "not meant to be offensive" had actually offended. They were trying to see how free they really were by printing sober, non-offensive cartoons that happened to depict Prophet Muhammad as a sword wielding felon and a terrorist. Ah-huh. On the other side, a bunch of Islamist leaders who never lose an opportunity to embody their own stereotypes have screamed themselves hoarse demanding for heads to roll, literally. Whereas this whole affair is a mockery of all that has been subsumed in human civilization under the lofty headings of freedom and faith, I wish plague on both extremist houses and feel justified in mocking the whole affair in Nabokovian heroic verse:

*Now I shall speak of evil as none has
Spoken before. I loath the righteously indignant free-speech ass
And the white bearded clerical moron burning a sack
Billed as George Bush, the ridiculous, jihadi hack.*

Let me start with the slogans coming from the "freedom of speech" side show. Christopher Hitchens, the ex-leftist curmudgeon and newfangled neocon, whose eye-of-the-needle morality denies admission to such "religious nuts" as Mother Theresa but lets through the camel of Tony Blair's war on Iraq, is telling it like it is. He doesn't like it that Muslims are denying him the pleasures of smutty comics because, you know... what's next, pork and wine? One has to draw the line against those religious nuts somewhere! For a scarier ride on the hypocrisy roller coaster try the professional Muslim hater, Daniel Pipes, for whom verbal denial of the holocaust is cause for banishment from the human race but depiction of prophet Muhammad with a pig's snout in the act of writing the Qur'an is protected speech.

Let's be clear about this. The rights-oriented polity and its protection of privacy, freedom of conscience, assembly and speech is an achievement of humankind, on par with the invention of the wheel, zero, and penicillin. No modern person would want to live in a society lacking any of these. I certainly don't. But the dogmatic, ahistorical and, apolitical defense of freedom of speech is insufficient for understanding, let alone tackling, the current crisis. The laws of gravity are true and universally valid but they don't explain World War II. Freedom of speech is an abstract right but it comes with legal restrictions and formal as well informal sanctions limiting its use. Laws against libeling, incitement and hate speech restrict freedom of expression everywhere in the liberal democratic West and in international law. Considerations of propriety, taste and decorum further limit the absolute right to shoot off one's mouth. Only a fool would attempt to gauge how free he is by publicly using an ethnic slur. When a politician puts his foot in his mouth in this manner you don't see him (and it's usually a him) hide behind freedom of expression. You certainly don't see a hundred newspapers reprinting that slur in support of his "freedom of expression." The "in-group" curtailing of our freedom of speech is so ubiquitous that, like the proverbial water for fish, we are blind to it. In an age of globalization where our audiences have expanded it stands to reason to extend the curtsies we reserve for our own minorities (e.g., blacks in America and Jews in Europe) to more distant "others."

"But," I expect to be heckled at this point, "why are Muslims so sensitive to the portrayals of their prophet? We mock our own sacred symbols! Why can't 'they' be more like us?" Modern Jews and Christians who are puzzled by the strong reaction of Muslims to mocking depictions of their prophet must return to historical analogues of these sentiments in their own civilizations. Hanukkah celebrates, among other things, an iconoclastic rampage in Jerusalem against graven images (read religious art). Byzantine iconoclasts (711-843) considered even the most loving depiction of Christ as an insidious effort to separate the human and divine natures of the Lord. Killing, maiming and certainly destroying and defacing works art went on for more than a century in the Eastern Roman Empire. Today any traveler of the Levant can still see the disheartening results of that campaign. In the mid-sixteenth century Protestant iconoclasm revived the same sentiments and led riots that destroyed monasteries and churches in half a dozen European capitals. Denizens of Copenhagen who are surprised by the strong reaction of Muslims to their cartoons must consult the accounts of violent treatment of Catholic religious art in their own city 476 years ago. In the pre-enlightenment sixteenth century, good Danes violently destroyed good works of art because they lovingly depicted Jesus Christ. Just imagine what they would have done to mocking images of their Lord and Savior. Islam is in its sixteenth century. Islamic reformers are trying to usher in an enlightenment of their own. Inflaming the deepest religious sentiments of the population plays into the hands of the radicals and shovels sand into the gears of religious reformers in Islam.

Okay, now that I have emoted like everybody else, let me let me call back that plague I called on the houses of the extremists on both sides. But I will do that only if they stop screaming and listen:

1 Realize that regardless of your wishes, post-enlightenment Europe and pre-enlightenment Middle East remain different in every conceivable way. You may want to change that fact but, in the meanwhile, please respect it as a fact.

2 Realize that seven billion bipeds are sharing this tiny shrinking, globalizing planet. This means that some exclusionary "principles" no matter how heartfelt they might be, must be jettisoned in the interest of peace and

our collective evolution.

3 Note that it is more important to be “responsible” than to be “right.” The opposite of “responsibility” is not “freedom” to express your liberal or religious views. The opposite of responsibility is “alienation” from your social, political and global environment and the dogmatic, self-righteous abandon that leads to death and destruction.

4 Take it easy.



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