

Voice of the Left

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To Print or Not to Print – That Is the Question

As I sit down to write in the cozy confines of my favorite Laguna Beach coffee shop, thousands of religious extremists continue to rampage throughout the Middle East over the decision of some European publishers to publish a series of cartoons satirically depicting the prophet Muhammad. Apparently these folks were so upset at being portrayed as terrorists, they were forced into terrorizing!

Isn't that a pity.

Yes, these folks were genuinely offended. So, what should the Western media have done? Even more important...in the midst of such turmoil... Is there a lesson to be learned?

You better believe there is – a simple one. Free speech should override religious sensitivities – EVERYTIME.

No, it's not a good rule for newspapers to insult people's religious beliefs just for the sake of it. But that is and should be the decision of the newspapers themselves, not a decision for governments, clerics, or other self-appointed arbiters of responsibility. Why? Because if a society is to be truly free, its people must be free to publish whatever they want, whenever they want, within the limits set by law.

Of course no country permits completely free speech. Generally speaking, this freedom is limited by prohibitions against libel, defamation, obscenity, national security (now that's another subject!) and inflammatory rhetoric deliberately designed to cause harm to a person or group. The cartoons in question are guilty of none of these offenses. No sane thinking individual could argue that the controversial caricatures were obscene, defaming, or an attempt to incite violence against Muslims.

The cartoons were lawful in all the European countries where they were published.

Freedom to poke fun at religion and religious fanaticism is not just a hard-won human right, but a principle lying at the cornerstone of all free societies. If such an integral expression of liberty is threatened by violence, it is the duty of all freedom-loving people, and of their governments, to defend it. Yes, the media ought to show sensitivity when the things they say might stir up hatred or hurt the feelings of vulnerable minorities. Nevertheless, sensitivity can not and must not ordain silence.

Let's not overlook the fundamental root underlying the indignation and rage of those extremists who have taken to the streets. The recent violence is just another manifestation of a culture of intolerance, hatred and xenophobia. And here lies another irrefutable truth

The hard work of rooting out these pernicious societal shortcomings in the Muslim world will never be accomplished by the military might of the US and Britain.

The Muslim world must rid itself of these evils.

Honest Muslim leaders and intellectuals must be willing to retrace their tradition's steps and do the intellectual heavy lifting that participation in the modern world requires. They will not be helped; however, by Western governments or media who pander to radical-Islamic sensitivities, while looking away from violent Islamic intolerance. They certainly won't be helped by European diplomats and officials who ignore officially sanctioned hate regularly directed at Jews and Christians by Middle Eastern government-controlled media, while commiserating with fanatical Muslims offended by a few cartoons.