

Muslims and the West: A Culture War?

Newspaper cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad have set off an international row with dangerous consequences, both short and long term. The controversial caricatures first published in Denmark and then in other European newspapers, target Muhammad and Islam and equate them with extremism and terrorism. In response to outcries and demonstrations across the Muslim world, the media has justified these cartoons as freedom of expression; France's Soir and Germany's Die Welt asserted a "right to caricature God" and a "right to blasphemy," respectively.

One of the first questions I have been asked about this conflict by media from Europe, the U.S., and Latin America has been "Is Islam incompatible with Western values?" Are we seeing a culture war? Before jumping to that conclusion, we should ask, whose Western democratic and secular values are we talking about? Is it a Western secularism that privileges no religion in order to provide space for all religions and to protect belief and unbelief alike? Or is it a Western "secular fundamentalism" that is anti-religious and increasingly, post 9/11, anti-Islam?

What we are witnessing today has little to do with Western democratic values and everything to do with a European media that reflects and plays to an increasingly xenophobic and Islamophobic society. The cartoons seek to test and provoke; they are not ridiculing Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi but mocking Muslims' most sacred symbols and values as they hide behind the façade of freedom of expression. The win-win for the media is that explosive headline events, reporting them or creating them, also boosts sales. The rush to reprint the Danish cartoons has been as much about profits as about the prophet of Islam. Respected European newspapers have acted more like tabloids.

What is driving Muslim responses? At first blush, the latest Muslim outcries seem to reinforce the post 9/11 question of some pundits: "Why do they hate us?" with an answer that has become "conventional wisdom": "They hate our success, democracy, freedoms" ..., a facile and convenient as well as wrong-headed response. Such answers fail to recognize that the core issues in this "culture war" are about faith, Muhammad's central role in Islam, and the respect and love that he enjoys as the paradigm to be emulated. They are also more broadly about identity, respect (or lack of it) and public humiliation. Would the mainstream media with impunity publish caricatures of Jews or of the holocaust? As France's Grand Rabbi Joseph Sitruk observed: "We gain nothing by lowering religions, humiliating them and making caricatures of them. It's a lack of honesty and respect," he said. He said freedom of expression 'is not a right without limits'." (AP Feb 3)

A recently completed Gallup World Poll, that surveyed Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia, enables us to find data-based answers about Islam by listening to the voices of a billion Muslims. This ground-breaking Gallup study provides a context and serves as a reality check on the causes for widespread outrage.

When asked to describe what Western societies could do to improve relations with the Arab/Muslim world, by far the most frequent reply (47% in Iran, 46% in Saudi Arabia, 43% in Egypt, 41% in Turkey, etc.) was that they should demonstrate more understanding and respect for Islam, show less prejudice, and not denigrate what Islam stands for. At the same time, large numbers of Muslims cite the West's technological success and its liberty and freedom of speech as what they most admire. When asked if they would include a provision for Freedom of Speech, defined as allowing all citizens to express their opinion on political, social and economic issues of the day if they were drafting a constitution for a new country, overwhelming majorities (94% in Egypt, 97% in Bangladesh, 98% in Lebanon etc.) in every country surveyed responded yes, they would.

Cartoons defaming the Prophet and Islam by equating them with terrorism are inflammatory. They reinforce Muslim grievances, humiliation and social marginalization and drive a wedge between the West and moderate Muslims, unwittingly playing directly into the hands of extremists. They also reinforce autocratic rulers who charge that democracy is ant-religious and incompatible with Islam.

Where do we go from here?

Core principles and values, like freedom of speech, cannot be compromised. However, freedoms do not exist in a vacuum; they do not function without limits. In many countries, hate speech (such as holocaust denial, incitement to racial hatred, advocating genocide) is a criminal offense prohibited under incitement to hatred legislation. Our western secular democracies represent not only freedom of expression but also freedom of religion. Belief as well as unbelief needs to be protected. Freedom of religion in a pluralistic society ought to mean that some things are sacred and treated as such. The Islamophobia which is becoming a social cancer should be as unacceptable as anti-Semitism, a threat to the very fabric of our democratic pluralistic way of life. Thus, it is imperative for political and religious leaders, commentators and experts, and yes, the media, to lead in building and safeguarding our cherished values.

And what about Muslim responses? Muslim leaders are hard pressed to take charge, asserting their faith and rights as citizens, affirming freedom of expression while rejecting its abuse as a cover for prejudice. A sharp line must be drawn between legitimate forms of dissent and violent demonstrations or

attacks on embassies that inflame the situation, and reinforce Western stereotypes. The many Muslim leaders, from America and Europe to the Muslim world, who have publicly urged restraint and strongly condemned violence, play a critical role.

Globalization and an increasingly multicultural and multireligious West test the mettle of our cherished democratic values. As the current cartoon controversy underscores, pluralism and tolerance today demand greater mutual understanding and respect from non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

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