

Cartoon calculus: Light and heat

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Cartoons are, by their nature, caricatures—oversimplifications designed to make a forceful point and provoke debate. Editors know that one powerful cartoon can generate more furor than dozens of provocative articles. Therefore editors usually make a rough calculation: Will the cartoon generate light as well as heat? Will the publishing of it be, as St. Paul would put it, not only lawful but beneficial? This is not an exact science, and benefits do not necessarily come without pain.

A Danish newspaper's cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad have provoked riots and killings, the burning of several embassies and churches, and death threats against the cartoonists. So an obvious conclusion might be that Flemming Rose, culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, made the wrong calculation (even if one would defend his right to make it). Relations between Muslims and the West, one might say, can't bear such provocations.

But the violence can hardly be blamed on Rose. Some critics say he should have known that Islam forbids depiction of the Prophet. But is that true? Islam has a long tradition of representing Muhammad. While some imams have taken a stricter stance against images in recent years, some lighthearted images of the Prophet have been published without incident. Some say the cartoons deliberately insult Islam. But the Danish cartoon deemed most offensive to Muslims—Muhammad with a bomb growing out of his turban—can plausibly be read to suggest that the faith has been hijacked by terrorists, not that Muhammad was a terrorist.

In any case, the protests in the Middle East were carefully orchestrated affairs. Danish flags suitable for burning did not magically appear in the streets of Tehran and Damascus. Religious leaders had publicized the Danish cartoons and fabricated a few more in a deliberate effort to incite outrage. Rulers in the Middle East were happy to support the protests, at least up to a point, because denouncing infidel Europe is a convenient way for them to shore up their religious credentials while distracting citizens from more immediate political concerns.

Rose contends that among Danes—the intended audience, after all—the cartoons have had the desired effect in the five months since publication: they have fostered a constructive public debate—free of violence—in which moderate Danish Muslims have taken the lead in talking about the place of Islam in a liberal democracy. Parvez Ahmed, chair of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, called the cartoons a “tasteless caricature” but declared that “burning flags, destroying embassies and threatening innocent people are hardly appropriate responses. The Prophet Muhammad, who preached repelling evil with kindness, certainly would not approve of such violent acts” (*Bergen Record*, February 9). CAIR has decided to respond to the controversy by offering an educational program on the life of Muhammad. We hope for more such responses to the controversy that seek to offer light, not heat.