

Muhammad cartoons stir debate on faith and free expression: Divided reactions

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Muslim anger over Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad is expected to rise after French and German newspapers reprinted the caricatures February 1, saying they did so in support of free expression.

France-Soir, a French daily, splashed its own cartoon across its front page, showing Jesus, Jehovah, Buddha and an upset Muhammad sitting on a cloud. “Don’t whine,” Jesus is telling Muhammad, “we’ve all been made fun of here.”

“Yes,” the French newspaper declared in its headline, “one has the right to make fun of God.”

That right has been questioned by many in recent weeks, as outrage over a dozen cartoons of the Muslim prophet published in Denmark’s *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper spread across the Middle East and other Muslim countries.

One of the drawings depicted Muhammad wearing a turban shaped as a bomb with a burning fuse. But the reaction was about more than just the message on terrorism. Islam strictly forbids any images of its prophet, on the grounds that they could lead to idolatry.

Saudi Arabia and Libya recalled their ambassadors from Denmark to protest the caricatures. A panoply of religious and political leaders denounced the cartoons—some even calling for punishment.

The Danish newspaper has apologized for offending Muslims, but not for printing the cartoons—because “no law was broken.” Now *France-Soir* and two German newspapers—*Die Welt* and *Berliner Zeitung*—have reprinted them in defiance of Muslim anger.

The French newspaper defended its decision to publish all 12 of the cartoons in its inside pages as a reaction to “religious intolerance that refuses to support any mockery, any satire, any gibes.”

Political, religious and human rights leaders offered divided reactions. In France, home to Western Europe’s largest Muslim population, French Muslim Council head Dalil Boubakeur called the reprints “a new provocation.”

On a visit to Beirut February 1, Norway’s deputy foreign affairs secretary, Raymond Johansen, described publication of the cartoons as “unfortunate and regrettable.” And Morocco’s Supreme Council of religious leaders attacked the cartoons, saying their publication could not be condoned.

But the Paris-based organization Reporters Without Borders defended the newspapers, with Annabelle Arki, head of the group’s Europe desk, saying “press freedom means publishing all kinds of opinions.” *-Religion News Service*