

# Calgary Herald

## Muslim Cartoons: A right, or assault on dignity?: Provocation is no way to defend democracy

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Photo:

Integrity dilemmas are inevitable, particularly in a globalizing world. There are always times when two or more values conflict. The publication of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in Danish newspapers, and subsequently in other media, is justified by some as an exercise of the right of free speech.

The value being protected is individuals' rights to free speech and free expression. Nonetheless, from the perspective of many Muslims, the right of free speech does not trump the value of human dignity.

Some condone the cartoons' publication; others condemn it. As a global community, we have cast this clash of values in black and white, and the polarized reaction is fuelling violence. Can these conflicting perspectives be reconciled? Is there an opportunity for meaningful and empathetic dialogue about possible grey zones?

Solutions to ethical dilemmas flourish in the topsoil of dialogue. To view the dilemma from all perspectives, we must dig deeper to understand motivations. What motivated the original publication of these offensive caricatures of Prophet Muhammad? What motivated subsequent reprints of the caricatures? And, most importantly, what motivates the justifications for the publication and the violent aftermath?

Original publication of the caricatures was, arguably, not intended to offend the dignity of Muslims. It might be explained as an overly zealous exercise of the right of freedom of speech, or an unintended consequence of naivete by rogue news agencies.

Muslim communities recognize the value of free speech and expression; indeed, Muslims have stood in solidarity with those who have protested in support of such freedoms. Muslim communities also acknowledge the actions of news agencies may not reflect popular sentiment.

In Denmark, the criminal code requires that the right to any freedom be measured against the preservation of dignity (Sections 140 and 266b). A government does not have the luxury of selectively enforcing such laws; it must be consistent to maintain legitimacy.

Some argue that the universal Muslim reaction to the publication of the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad was not readily predictable. Icons of Christian and

Jewish faith have provided ample fodder for satire, without widespread offence being taken. Muslim agitation leaped like wildfire from community to community -- from the Middle East to Afghanistan to Indonesia to North Africa to Europe to North America -- via Internet and television.

The momentum of these communications and the reactions that they galvanized afford insight into Islam in a globalized world.

It was a lethal mistake to have underestimated the Muslim reaction. The Danish caricatures jabbed at raw nerves. This literary gunpowder added fuel to the smouldering anguish of a faith community that feels alienated -- pushed to the limits on a daily basis in wartorn communities where violence and death have become habitual, or struggling to reclaim normalcy within European communities where they experience mounting marginalization.

Understanding the motivations underlying re-publication of the cartoons is more challenging. Once aware of the reaction, why then did news agencies reprint the obviously offending images? Was this a callous act of spite, or a deliberate reclaiming of freedom-of-speech boundaries?

In our attempts to make sense of the wrath of Muslim demonstrators worldwide, attention is drawn to the fact that western standards of freedom are withheld elsewhere.

The argument that Arab governments would normally be quick to suppress demonstrations against their own regimes while condoning the arson of embassies and media offices is relevant. But, does it truly steal legitimacy from the values in question? Islam is not reliant upon those who resort to violence while purporting to act in its name. However, ignorance can be a powerful catalyst for hostility. We need to acknowledge that the anger of Muslims is genuine.

If we do not endeavour to understand true motivations for the mounting resentment, the publication of the caricatures will have served no other purpose than to prop up undemocratic regimes. Indeed, we will reinforce bonds between despots and their oppressed masses. The case for democracy must be made through enlightened interpretations of its ideals and its spirit. By provoking more than 20 per cent of humanity, pleas for democracy will continue to fall on deaf ears.

The relationship between the Islamic world and the West is fragile and rife with misconception. Publication of the cartoons attests to this sensitive atmosphere and their re-publication is inexplicable. It is unlikely that half-hearted apologies will be received as sincere or adequate.

Reconciling the value of uncensored free speech with the value of affording dignity and respect to individuals and communities will never be as simple as some would be led to believe.

For those navigating this pressing and increasingly polarized integrity dilemma, lasting solutions will be conditional upon their ability to foster empathy and compassion. Harmonizing direction is an imperative if we are to reconcile the values at issue, within a truly democratic society.

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