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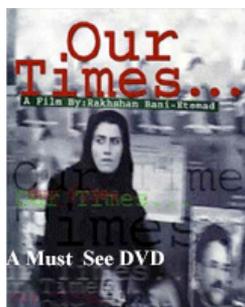
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### Free speech

## Mohammad & the Holocaust

*Cartoons as political weapons of mass destruction*



Charles Bittinger

[Reza T. Saberi](#)

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[iranian.com](#)

A good American friend of mine recently asked me during the lunch break, "What do you think of recent events in the Moslem world regarding the cartoon of the Prophet Mohammad?" He meant the cartoons in which the Prophet Mohammad is depicted with a turban made of rows of dynamite, or another one where he is worried that there are not enough virgins for the suicide bombers in paradise.

I told him that the Middle Eastern societies are generally religious and the process of secularization which took place for about six hundred years in the Christian societies of Europe had only started about one hundred years ago in the Islamic world and even this process has been pushed back in many of them after the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

During those six centuries, philosophers, free thinkers, scientists, artists, poets, and writers, criticized, ridiculed, and neutralized Christianity and Judaism rendering obsolete religious edicts, rules, and laws. So nothing was left from Christianity but simple, basic rules- sort of love this, love that. For this reason Westerners generally are not sensitive to religious ridicule and criticism.

I then asked him, "What would you think if a major American paper such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* were to publish a cartoon of Jesus selling condoms?"

He burst out laughing and said, "That would be funny."

So I asked him, "What about if they depict him with another man in bed complaining of women as an inferior sex partner?"

He said, "That would be interesting, but I am sure they will never publish this cartoons for many different reasons, including lack of taste, and so as not to offend readers."

I told him, "It might be interesting to you, because you are not a zealous Christian, but what about those fundamentalist Christians who bomb abortion clinics on the basis of their faith or Ayatollah Pat Robertson who recently issued one fatwa for the killing of president Chavez of Venezuela and another one for General Sharon? Wouldn't those fundamentalist Christian be upset and bomb the offices of these newspapers? Wouldn't there be a public protest?"

He nodded his head.

I was happy bringing him to this point so I asked, "How about if they publish a cartoon depicting Moses exchanging his two sons for a bag of gold coins and when another man asks him why he is selling his only two sons, he says, 'I can get them half price in India!' Wouldn't this cartoon hurt Jews, Christians, Moslems, and Indians? Do you still consider its publication the right to free speech?"

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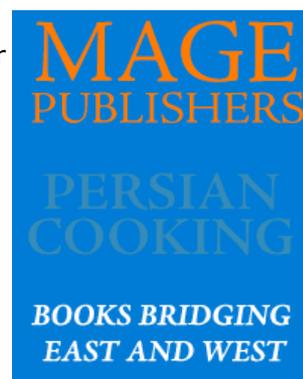
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He said, "Of course it offends all of them, but those sorts of cartoons are not publishable in the United States."

I said, "I know that, although the cartoon might be funny for one who is not related to Abrahamic religions or Indian culture, it is definitely not funny for the many others who are related to this religions and culture. It is exactly because of this reason that many of the Moslems in the Islamic world are offended by those cartoons, while the Europeans and Americans are talking of freedom of speech."

Then I added, "Moslems can not ridicule Judo-Christian prophets, because they believe in them and respect them, but how about if they go and ridicule things that are sacred in Western societies or they are sensitive about it, how would they feel about it? What if somebody publishes a cartoon of one of those gas chambers with a sign on one door saying 'free food' with a long line of rich-looking Jews in front of it and another sign on the other side the building saying 'jewelry sale' with a long line of rich-looking Jews waiting in front of the door to buy the left over jewelry of those who came for free food and were gassed and burned? Wouldn't that hurt Westerners' feelings, whether Jew or Christian?"

I saw the disgust in his eyes and he said, "It is reprehensible." I told him, "Gradually I am reaching to your weak point. I bet that many who are familiar with the background and history of this subject consider this cartoon disgusting and disturbing. Many others who are not familiar may not react to it at all. So, something sacred for one may not necessarily be sacred for another one. The beef in your hamburger is a delicious food, but it is somebody's sacred animal in another country. If those Westerners, who defend the publishing of the Prophet Mohammad cartoons on the basis of freedom of speech agree with the publishing of Holocaust cartoons I have no problem with them. But if they made an exception in this case and support publication of the Prophet Mohammad cartoons and condemn publication of cartoons about the Holocaust, then that is a matter of hypocrisy and the double standards the West always applies in dealing with the rest of the world. We should always look at the cultural sensitivity of those who are offended not at our own cultural sensitivity to that matter."



When an Iranian paper announced that since you ridicule things that are sacred for us, then we are free to ridicule yours as well and announced a competition for cartoons about the Holocaust, many Westerners cried and said this is an exception. The same day the spokesman for the White House was quick to denounce it and called it "horrific".

Yes, depicting Prophet Mohammad with dynamite in his turban is also horrific for millions of Moslem whose only inspiration in life is their faith. Ridiculing anybody's faith is "horrific" including faith in the Holocaust. The Holocaust is one of the West's sacred taboos. Let's not turn it into a faith. We know it happened, but we also should not be afraid of those who question if it is happened or question its extent. It is a legitimate academic question and we should address it without fear. We should show them the documents and historical facts which are available. Those who get crazy about these kinds of questions and then support the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad on the basis of freedom of speech are in the same boat as those who are angry about the Prophet Mohammad cartoon and ridicule the Holocaust.

I believe the world is getting smaller and smaller everyday and as people of all cultures and faiths come face to face we should be more tolerant and respectful of each others beliefs. The people of the world are getting more similar to each other in every aspect of daily life and globalization has brought far away people of different faiths and cultures in close contact with each other. If we do not want to be similar in our faith, opinions, and way of thinking, then we should at least respect each other's beliefs.

We must be friendlier. The world is getting smaller and we are in easy reach of others. There is no room for hatred and bigotry. Yes, we must be very careful not hurt each other- that is the first message of freedom of speech and democracy.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the fourteen century Persian poet Sa'adi who

wrote:

*Mankind is part of the same body, since they are from the same matter in creation*

*If one part of the body suffers from the pain, other parts will also be hurt.*

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