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Op-Ed Contributor

Our Faith in Letting It All Hang Out

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IF you want to understand what is and isn't at stake in the Danish cartoon furor, just listen to the man who started it all, Flemming Rose, the culture editor of the newspaper Jyllands-Posten. Mr. Rose told Time magazine that he asked 40 Danish cartoonists to "depict Muhammad as they see him," after he noticed that journalists, historians and even museum directors were wary of presenting the Muslim religion in an unfavorable light, or in any light at all.

"To me," he said, this "spoke to the problem of self-censorship and freedom of speech." The publication of the cartoons, he insisted, "was not directed at Muslims" at all. Rather, the intention was "to put the issue of self-censorship on the agenda and have a debate about it."

I believe him. And not only do I believe that he has nothing against Muhammad or the doctrines of Islam, I believe that he has no interest (positive or negative) in them at all, except as the possible occasions of controversy.

This is what it means today to put self-censorship "on the agenda": the particular object of that censorship — be it opinions about a religion, a movie, the furniture in a friend's house, your wife's new dress, whatever — is a matter of indifference. What is important is not the content of what is expressed but that it be expressed. What is important is that you let it all hang out.

Mr. Rose may think of himself, as most journalists do, as being neutral with respect to religion — he is not speaking as a Jew or a Christian or an atheist — but in fact he is an adherent of the religion of letting it all hang out, the religion we call liberalism.

The first tenet of the liberal religion is that everything (at least in the realm of expression and ideas) is to be permitted, but nothing is to be taken seriously. This is managed by the familiar distinction — implied in the First Amendment's religion clause — between the public and private spheres. It is in the private sphere — the personal spaces of the heart, the home and the house of worship — that one's religious views are allowed full sway and dictate behavior.

But in the public sphere, the argument goes, one's religious views must be put forward with diffidence and circumspection. You can still have them and express them — that's what separates us from theocracies and tyrannies — but they should be worn lightly. Not only must there be no effort to make them into the laws of the land, but they should not be urged on others in ways that make them uncomfortable. What religious beliefs are owed — and this is a word that appears again and again in the recent debate — is "respect"; nothing less, nothing more.

The thing about respect is that it doesn't cost you anything; its generosity is barely skin-deep and is in fact a form of condescension: I respect you; now don't bother me. This was certainly the message conveyed by Rich Oppel, editor of *The Austin (Tex.) American-Statesman*, who explained his decision to reprint one of the cartoons thusly: "It is one thing to respect other people's faith and religion, but it goes beyond where I would go to accept their taboos."

Clearly, Mr. Oppel would think himself pressured to "accept" the taboos of the Muslim religion were he asked to alter his behavior in any way, say by refraining from publishing cartoons depicting the Prophet. Were he to do that, he would be in danger of crossing the line between "respecting" a taboo and taking it seriously, and he is not about to do that.

This is, increasingly, what happens to strongly held faiths in the liberal state. Such beliefs are equally and indifferently authorized as ideas people are perfectly free to believe, but they are equally and indifferently disallowed as ideas that might serve as a basis for action or public policy.

Strongly held faiths are exhibits in liberalism's museum; we appreciate them, and we congratulate ourselves for affording them a space, but should one of them ask of us more than we are prepared to give — ask for deference rather than mere respect — it will be met with the barrage of platitudinous arguments that for the last week have filled the pages of every newspaper in the country.

One of those arguments goes this way: It is hypocritical for Muslims to protest cartoons caricaturing Muhammad when cartoons vilifying the symbols of Christianity and Judaism are found everywhere in the media of many Arab countries. After all, what's the difference? The difference is that those who draw and publish such cartoons in Arab countries believe in their content; they believe that Jews and Christians follow false religions and are proper objects of hatred and obloquy.

But I would bet that the editors who have run the cartoons do not believe that Muslims are evil infidels who must either be converted or vanquished. They do not publish the offending cartoons in an effort to further some religious or political vision; they do it gratuitously, almost accidentally. Concerned only to stand up for an abstract principle — free speech — they seize on whatever content happens to come their way and use it as an example of what the principle should be protecting. The fact that for others the content may be life itself is beside their point.

This is itself a morality — the morality of a withdrawal from morality in any strong, insistent form. It is certainly different from the morality of those for whom the Danish cartoons are blasphemy and monstrously evil. And the difference, I think, is to the credit of the Muslim protesters and to the discredit of the liberal editors.

The argument from reciprocity — you do it to us, so how can you complain if we do it to you? — will have force only if the moral equivalence of "us" and "you" is presupposed. But the relativizing of ideologies and religions belongs to the liberal theology, and would hardly be persuasive to a Muslim.

This is why calls for "dialogue," issued so frequently of late by the pundits with an unbearable smugness — you can just see them thinking, "What's wrong with these people?" — are unlikely to fall on receptive ears. The belief in the therapeutic and redemptive force of dialogue depends on the assumption (central to liberalism's theology) that, after all, no idea is worth fighting over to the death and that we can always reach a position of accommodation if only we will sit down and talk it out.

But a firm adherent of a comprehensive religion doesn't want dialogue about his beliefs; he wants those beliefs to prevail. Dialogue is not a tenet in his creed, and invoking it is unlikely to do anything but further persuade him that you have missed the point — as, indeed, you are pledged to do, so long as liberalism is the name of your faith.

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