

Political Cartoons

The perils of mocking the Prophet,
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When Christians eat hamburgers, Hindus do not threaten to kill them. When nonbelievers tell jokes about Jesus and Moses playing golf, Catholics and Jews do not burn down buildings. But if anyone “offends” Islam, said **Christopher Hitchens** in *Slate.com*, they risk a death sentence. This week, tens of thousands of Muslims on three continents burned buildings, rioted, and issued death threats, all because of some supposedly blasphemous editorial cartoons. First printed in a Danish newspaper, the cartoons dared suggest that the Prophet Mohammed has inspired legions of “barbaric” followers to become terrorists. Amid cries of “Hang the man who insulted the Prophet!” outraged Muslims have responded by firebombing Scandinavian embassies in Damascus and Tehran, attacking the European Union office in Gaza, and burning scores of Danish flags. At least 12 people have been killed. Several Arab countries have recalled their ambassadors to Denmark, and Muslim consumers are boycotting Danish goods—even Lego building blocks.

We’re witnessing “the fascist intolerance at the heart of radical Islam,” said **Jeff Jacoby** in *The Boston Globe*. The cartoons were originally commissioned to demonstrate the “climate of intimidation” that surrounds any discussion of Islamic culture. As it happens, the 12 drawings that were printed are “tame to the point of dullness.” One shows Mohammed with a bomb in his turban; another depicts him in heaven telling newly arrived suicide bombers, “Stop, stop! We have run out of virgins!” That anything so juvenile could evoke such a murderous backlash “speaks volumes about the chasm” between the West and so much of the Islamic world.

What’s really upsetting, said **Tim Rutten** in the *Los Angeles Times*, is how Western officials have been “falling all over themselves” to atone for the drawings. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Danish Prime Minister Anders Rasmussen, and Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen are just some of the leaders who have issued needless apologies. The U.S. response has been just as feckless, said **Paul Marshall** in *The Weekly Standard*. Many European newspapers have bravely closed ranks and reprinted the cartoons in solidarity with the artists. Yet virtually no major American media outlet has run the drawings. In a transparent attempt to curry favor in the Muslim world, the State Department even issued a mealy-mouthed statement that “anti-Muslim images are as unacceptable as anti-Semitic images.” So much for America’s belief in free speech.

But even free speech has its limits, said **H.D.S. Greenway** in *The Boston Globe*. The European papers that are so “gleefully” reprinting the cartoons aren’t acting like champions of civil liberties; they seem more determined to gratuitously “stick it” to the Islamic world. Given the tensions and misunderstandings that already exist, that’s just reckless. “When the peace of the 21st century depends on some kind of accommodation between East and West, free speech doesn’t require that we play so carelessly with matches.”

Obviously, we should avoid offending people’s religions arbitrarily, said **Andrew Sullivan** in *Time*. “But the Danish cartoons were not arbitrarily offensive. They were designed specifically to reveal Islamic intolerance—and they have now done so, in abundance.” What the rioters are saying is that it’s not enough that they follow the

dictates of their faith; the rest of the world must do so, too, on pain of death. That's why this incident, absurd as it is, constitutes a true clash of civilizations, said **Kathleen Parker** in the *Orlando Sentinel*. "Until Muslim peoples get the idea that free expression means freedom to offend as well as to be offended, we have a problem." This is a war of ideas, and it promises to be a long one.