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A Right to Offend?

Why the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad is deepening the divide between Islam and the West

By JAMES GRAFF

Whether a butterfly's wing beat can cause a tornado is still a central debate of chaos theory. But it is now proven that drawings first published more than four months ago in Denmark have seeded outrage among Muslims from Gaza to Jakarta and embittered believers making their lives in Europe. An editor's decision--call it feisty or cavalier--to ask Danish cartoonists to depict the Prophet Muhammad has provoked a volcanic reaction, from a Muslim boycott of Danish goods to the torching of two European embassies in Damascus to death threats and lawsuits against newspapers, and even to a new slogan in the streets of U.S.-bashing Iran: "Death to Denmark."

Death to Denmark? The whole affair seems to offer proof not only of chaos theory but also of Emily Post's dictum that you ought not to talk about religion--or to be prepared for anything if you do. To Muslims, the drawings were blasphemy, a violation of a cultural protocol not to portray the Prophet. The range of reactions to the cartoon's publication among Muslims and non-Muslims alike served as a reminder of the gaping divide that still exists between the West and much of the Islamic world. In a show of solidarity for their journalistic brethren in Denmark, television stations and newspapers in other European countries have shown some or all of the drawings, the most controversial of which portrays Muhammad's headdress transformed into a bomb with a burning fuse. Their intention was to strike a blow for free speech, but by publishing the cartoons, Europe's media outlets were perceived by some Muslims to be willfully ignoring religious sensitivities, which fueled the anger even more. Yet the demands by Muslim leaders that European governments punish journalists who have run the cartoons--Middle Eastern Interior Ministers gathering in Tunis last week expressed no preference for how, although a prayer leader in Gaza urged beheading--strike Europeans and Americans as unreasonable infringements on the ideals of free speech and limited government. The Bush Administration has attempted to uphold press freedom while acknowledging Muslim rage, calling the cartoons "offensive" but defending the media's right to publish them.

Is there a middle ground? It's worth noting that the vast majority of Western news outlets (including TIME) have chosen not to republish the cartoons, out of deference to Islamic sensitivities. On other occasions the U.S. media have exercised self-censorship in matters of religion; in 1992, for instance, after Sinead O'Connor outraged Catholics by ripping up a photo of the Pope on Saturday Night Live, NBC reran the show without O'Connor's performance. To Muslims, disrespect for the Prophet is a rallying point beyond worldly politics. And so as anger plays out in Muslim hearts, the challenge for the West in the days ahead is to figure out how to contain it.