

Those Unfunny Cartoons: *Should rights sometimes defer to good sense and decency?*

by Gerda Bikales

These last few weeks, I have been consuming far too much Danish cheese. I chalk up my additional unwanted poundage to my support of free speech. If Denmark's economy is the target of reprisals by offended Muslims because a Danish newspaper published disrespectful cartoons of the prophet Mohamed, I will do my bit to help this small nation and its free press.

And yet I must admit to revulsion at the idea of professional newspaper editors holding a contest to make fun of a major religious figure, revered through the centuries by hundreds of millions across the world, and then printing the winning entries. Granted, the paper has a right to do so, but is that reason enough to actually do it? Should there not be a few areas in which a measure of voluntary restraint is exercised, and some sensitivity is cultivated to hold back the impulse to ridicule what so many of the world's peoples hold sacred? And if "sensitivity" is too closely associated with the *parlance* of the politically correct, would not plain good sense counsel the avoidance of provocative religious imagery in times of deep tension? Europe is a continent drenched in the blood spilled during decades of religious wars, in the course of which Denmark itself was ravaged. Should this history not count for anything?

Though the publication of the cartoons is regrettable, the response of the Islamists has been wildly excessive, causing many deaths in the mayhem it generated. Sympathy for the radicals' hurt feelings

is hard to work up, considering that Islamic countries routinely publish articles and images insulting to Judaism, Christianity, and other "infidel" religions.

If I have to choose between cringing at the tasteless buffoonery of the Danish newspaper or defending freedom of speech, I will not hesitate:

Bring on the Havarti cheese!

And the crackers. ■

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