

## GUEST COLUMN

### The Danish Cartoons: Refrain or Publish?

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Should the American press publish the cartoons mocking Muhammad that appeared in the Danish newspapers? We think the answer to that question is quite complicated.

As Americans, a Muslim and a Jew, we share dependence for our freedom on the U.S. Constitution. We agree that the American press has the absolute Constitutional right under the First Amendment to publish the Danish cartoons, just as they may publish cartoons offensive to any other religion. Democracy requires that no one is immune to unpopular, even offensive views.

But right does not always make for good judgment. Even freedom of speech, as Justice Holmes said, does not give the right to yell “fire” in a crowded theater. Our world is shrinking and becoming more crowded. One needs to consider this cartoon issue not only through the lens of our Constitution, which we share in the governance of our political lives, but also through the many lenses of the many religions that Americans do not share.

Non-Muslims may not know that traditional principles of Islam forbid representing the Prophet pictorially. The offense to a Muslim of such depiction in a cartoon might be compared

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with a work of art depicting Christ's cross in a pail of urine or a cartoon depicting Jews drinking the blood of Christian or Muslim children – all of which have been published, and, of course, have terribly offended Christians and Jews. Our Constitution protects, as it should, the right to publish such offenses, but that does not make it good judgment to do so.

Our world is in a volatile state, especially in situations where religion, culture, modernization, and politics mix. We must distinguish between freedom of expression and hate speech meant deliberately to denigrate others or to incite violence. Even though hurtful expressions, uttered or depicted, from a provocateur might be protected under the Constitution, for others to repeat and propagate such expressions would be neither civil nor judicious.

There is no justification for the violence and death that has followed in the wake of the Danish cartoons. But there is also no justification for the use of such expressions to instigate offense and violence. To publish such cartoons is a Constitutional right, but civilized and compassionate people hold themselves to well-conceived, higher standards of mutual respect and sensitivity than the minimum standards set by law.

Ironically, the scores of deaths, riots, and international political wake of the Danish cartoons have created a public interest in seeing the cartoons – a good argument for making them available to the public. But good arguments can also be made that, in America's and the world's diverse and religiously pluralistic society, we should carefully consider one another's religious values and sensitivities before we take a step that seriously offends a large portion of our own citizens and others abroad.

The Danish cartoon incident underscores the importance of learning more about the religions and sensitivities of others. Our words and actions can have repercussions far beyond the intended audience. In a shrinking world with speed-of-light, internet communication, we

should listen harder to one another before we speak or publish. We should consider whether our utterances are a necessary and wise exercise of our freedom of expression or the unwise yelling of “fire” in a crowded theater.