

Education, sensitivity can bridge cultural gaps

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Guest essayist

(February 8, 2006; *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*) — If Muhammad (peace be upon him) were alive and a cartoon had appeared in the newspaper insulting and making a mockery of him, would he have reacted emotionally? I would say no. Prophet Muhammad was ridiculed and insulted daily during his lifetime, but he never reacted angrily. One day he was passing by when some Meccan leaders used abusive language against him, calling him Mudhamim (the cursed one). Muhammad's companions got angry, but Muhammad admonished them to ignore these leaders.

Why are the Muslims angry today over the cartoons? The cartoons came on the eve of Muslim New Year. One showed Muhammad wearing a turban shaped like a bomb. The cartoon not only violated the Muslim belief of banning any pictorial representation of Muhammad or other religious figures, but also showed him as a terrorist. On such a significant day of Islam, this portrayal could be seen as intentionally orchestrated.

Protesting against such an attack on one's religious belief is a person's right; however, doing so through violence is wrong. The Quran speaks of suppressing anger, respectful tolerance and forgiveness and doing well to those who do you wrong.

But why can't Muslims suppress their anger, and why have their protests become violent? First, the Muslims may be less educated. My own parents (may God be pleased with them) had no education at all. The education rate is less than 25 percent in many of the Muslim countries. Opportunist religious and political leaders can mislead masses that are illiterate. Islam makes education obligatory for Muslims male and female. But first the colonial powers left them uneducated and now the dictators do not want the Muslims to be educated, for educated people are hard to be misled blindly. One good thing during the ongoing protests is that many Muslim religious leaders are asking Muslims to remain peaceful. Many peaceful demonstrations have not been covered by the media. Demonstrations often become violent in Third World countries, not just those populated by Muslims.

The second reason could be lack of freedom of speech and expression. Muslims had no freedom under their colonial masters and dictators rule many Muslim countries today in their postcolonial period. Who brought these dictators to rule Muslims at their postcolonial period and who are still supporting them? I leave it to you to open the books of history and intelligence agencies. Yet, the most disturbing factor is that the European media is continually inciting the Muslims. Both European and American national media, some intellectual and religious leaders together have launched a hatred campaign against Islam and Muslims. The relations between the West and the Muslims are already weak and shrouded by mistrust and growing hatred. The Danish cartoon further widens the gap.

We need to develop sensitivity for each other's faiths. It is not only the Western media, some religious leaders, politicians and intellectuals, but it is also the Muslim media, some politicians, some religious leaders and intellectuals who are responsible for promoting religious and racial tensions.

The interfaith leadership cannot stay unresponsive but urgently needs to initiate dialogue on such issues. The Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue at Nazareth would welcome such dialogue to serve as a neutral and academic place for exchange of ideas and conflict resolution. If CISD would get funds, it would be pleased to sponsor an international conference of journalists and religious leaders to consider the issue of religious sensitivity and inter-religious relation.

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