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Why Are Political Cartoons Incendiary?

By VICTOR S. NAVASKY

AS the founding editor and publisher in the late 1950's of *Monocle*, a "leisurely quarterly of political satire" (that meant we came out twice a year) whose motto was "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king," whenever the offices of a satirical magazine are firebombed, I'm interested.

So earlier this month, when a Molotov cocktail landed in the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* — luckily no one was injured — I wanted to know more. It seems the bomb arrived the day after the publication chose the Prophet Muhammad as its guest editor in chief for that week's issue, and in a reference to Islamic law, or Shariah, temporarily changed its name to "Charia Hebdo." The issue also featured a cartoon image of the prophet on its cover and a caption that said "100 lashes if you don't die laughing." An equal opportunity offender, the periodical, historically known for pillorying Catholic clericalism and Judaism, was heavily criticized by Muslims in 2007 after reprinting cartoons of Muhammad published by a Danish newspaper that caused outrage in much of the Islamic world.

The magazine's editor, who goes by the name Charb, issued a statement saying "The prophet of Islam didn't have to be asked twice" to be editor "and we thank him for it." And the following issue featured a cartoon of *Charlie Hebdo* passionately kissing a Muslim man under the heading "Love is stronger than hate."

All of which once again spurred the debate on the relationship between free speech and the respectful treatment of Islam. Pierre Haski, a co-founder of a French news Web site, noted in *The Guardian* that "for many French Muslims, religion has become a cultural identity, a refuge in a troubled society where they don't feel accepted."

In this context, he sees the attack as "a disturbing reminder of the underground tensions in society." That prompted Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, a writer in the right-wing monthly *The American Spectator*, to condemn Mr. Haski for not condemning the firebombing. He added, (as if it didn't go without saying),

“There is no moral equivalence between those exercising their right to free speech and Islamists who wish to impose the standards of traditional Shariah on society and are prepared to harm physically others and their property to achieve that end.”

There is, however, another issue that is equally, if not more, interesting to those of us who still live in the land of the blind. The debate on free speech versus taking into account the religious sensibilities of oppressed minorities (and majorities) is an important one. But nobody is talking about why it is that people become so agitated by cartoons and caricatures — a medium that so many dismiss as silly, trivial and irrelevant.

Recent example: in August, masked gunmen beat Ali Farzat, a Syrian cartoonist, renowned throughout the Arab world, breaking two fingers on his drawing hand and his right arm after he published a cartoon showing President Bashar al-Assad hitching a ride out of town with Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi just before he was toppled from power.

Less recent example: On July 22, 1987, outside the London office of Al Qabas, the Kuwaiti newspaper for which he drew political caricatures, the Palestinian Naji al-Ali another leading cartoonist of the Arab world, was assassinated.

Arguably, Muslims, with their (ambiguous) prohibition against representations of Muhammad, are a special case, but it's not only Muslims who get upset about caricatures. And the focus on caricature and cartoonists is nothing new.

In the 19th century, Honoré Daumier, the great French caricaturist, was thrown into prison for his depiction of King Louis-Philippe as Gargantua. And in 1835, when the king re-established censorship, which had been temporarily suspended, it was not for print but rather for caricature (“censorship of the crayon”) on the ground that whereas “a pamphlet is no more than a violation of opinion, a caricature amounts to an act of violence.” And let's not forget that Julius Streicher, editor of the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*, notorious for its vicious, anti-Semitic cover caricatures, was the only war criminal executed by the Nuremberg tribunal who was not a high-ranking Nazi official.

Neuroscientists and Freudians all have their explanations as to why and under what circumstances people — be they Muslim workers, French tyrants or members of an international court — find this “silly,” “trivial” and “irrelevant” medium so threatening. I have long had a theory that one reason people become so agitated by cartoons is that there is no way of answering back. A caricature is by definition an exaggeration, a distortion, unfair. If you don't like an editorial you can write a letter to the editor, but there is no such thing as a cartoon to the editor.

But here's another thought. For years anthropologists, art historians and others have patronized so-called primitive peoples as naïve heathens, as guilty of fetishism, animism and totemism because they believed that pictures had magical powers, that in some sense they were alive. These days neuroscientists tell us that if we want to understand our emotional reaction to what we see, we have to understand the brain, its right (emotional) and left (rational) spheres and how the visual stimulus passes on the information to the region called the amygdala, the brain's so-called fear center.

Maybe so. But I can't help thinking that the British social historian E. P. Thompson was on to something when he wrote, in another connection, about “the enormous condescension of posterity.” In other words, if brains could whisper, mine would be whispering that perhaps these primitive peoples were right after all; maybe they knew not merely that pictures were magical but also why we should fear them.

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