

A TASTE OF HIDDEN THINGS

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If you've turned on your television or radio lately, or opened a newspaper or your favorite news website, you're likely to have seen or heard about the most recent brouhaha in the Muslim world. In September of last year, *Jyllands Posten*, a rather obscure newspaper published in Denmark, asked several cartoonists for submissions to a cartoon piece it was publishing about self-censorship. This originated from a comment made by the author of a children's book about Islam who complained he could find no one willing to provide a picture of Muhammad for his book.

Quoting here from an article on the BBC webpage: "The newspaper's culture editor, Flemming Rose, says he did not ask the illustrators to draw satirical caricatures of Muhammad. He asked them to draw the Prophet as they saw him." The way two of them saw the last prophet of Islam is wearing a bomb-shaped turban and another saying to some suicide bomber-acolytes that Paradise has run out of virgins for martyrs.

Denmark, according to reports, has a strong tradition of no-holds-barred satire. To imagine something similar, picture a newspaper editorial cartoonist in the US depicting Jesus hoisting a bomb at an abortion clinic or explaining to a recently deceased child he can't enter Heaven because he touched his willie.

It's a legitimate question to ask, "all right, I understand that depictions of Muhammad in this way are offensive, and these people certainly have a right to their offense, but why has it taken five months for them to object?" That's a good question and the best answer I have heard comes from a professor of religious studies at a university in Lebanon interviewed on the BBC. His response can be summarized thus: "It's not as if Danish newspapers have a wide readership in the Islamic world."

More importantly, the images were recently republished by a number of European newspapers in a feature about censorship. Those newspapers, situated as they are in Germany, France, Italy and Spain, do have a sizable Muslim readership. It is this reprinting that has triggered the protests which have at times turned violent.

Well, all right, you ask now, "Well, then, what is the problem?" And you might quote to me the comments of British member of Parliament Boris Johnson who said, "If you are a Muslim and your faith is strong and you believe in God and in your prophet then I don't think you should be remotely frightened of what some ludicrous infidel says or does about your religion or any depiction he produces. I think we've got to move away

from this hysterical and rather patronizing idea that we have got to treat the Muslim religion with kid gloves and not subject it to all the same rough and tumble that we subject other faiths to." That's a legitimate view and even, dare I say it, even coming from the mouth of a Conservative, a correct view.

The problem of course is that it doesn't take into account that Muslims don't see things that way, and they certainly don't see their treatment by the Western press as in any way suffering from a "hysterical and rather patronizing" treatment of Islam "with kid gloves." They see it instead as another, rather bald, rather ugly fart in the very face of their beliefs.

The problem as they see it is not that Muhammad is depicted satirically, but that he is depicted at all. I have seen these cartoons and I must say most of them really aren't that offensive and, in fact, some are very admiring. That isn't the point though, because while I may be the target for the cartoons, I am not the target of the injunction against them. While there is no specific prohibition within the Koran against depictions of the human form, Sura 42, verse 11 does say, "[Allah is] the originator of the heavens and the earth... [there is] nothing like a likeness of Him." This has been read to suggest that there is nothing that could possibly be as beautiful or grand as Allah which could be captured by human skill. To do so is to challenge, and thus insult, Allah. To quote Karen Armstrong in her magisterial *History of God*: "The perception of God's uniqueness was the basis of the morality of the Koran. To give allegiance to material goods or to put trust in lesser beings was *shirk* (idolatry), the greatest sin of Islam." This has been broadened to include Muhammad. Depictions can lead to idolatry, which is the greatest violation of god's will, the worship and veneration of an image in place of the divine being the image symbolizes.

All this is understandable and even defensible. Look, it's their religion and they can administrate it as they feel. But surely they're overstepping some boundary by protesting violently and en masse against any depiction done by non-Muslim artists—and here we need to remember that *Shariah*, Islamic law, recognizes that people who are not Muslim have different, sometimes conflicting laws, and the Muslim is called to a higher set of standards. But surely, this is an overreaction by the Muslim world.

Ah, but here is where things begin to get very sticky. Because I lied to you in the opening paragraph. This isn't a big deal in the Muslim world at all. In fact, among most Muslims, this whole thing was over and done with before it had even made headlines. On January 31, before this even blew up on the world stage, the editors of *Jyllands Posten* offered an apology for having offended Muslims. And while there is no Vatican of Islam from which a pope can make an official response, most Muslims accepted the apology and went on with their lives. While the protests make front page news here in America and in Great Britain and on CNN and the BBC, the headlines in *Al Ahram* and on *Al Jazeera*, the *New York Times* and *Fox News* of the Arab world, focus on the recent Hamas victory in Palestinian polls, the tragic Egyptian ferry fire, and the most recent comments of President Ahmadinejad of Iran. To be sure, there are articles concerning the protests on both English-language websites, but not on their original Arabic sites. The brouhaha is over for most Muslims. A recent *Al Jazeera* poll asked the question whether the apology offered by the editors was enough to put the matter to rest. Of the 15,000 self-selected respondents, 13,000 answered "yes." Only 2000 said "no."

Think of this. We have come to understand that *Al Jazeera's* primary audience is composed of people from whom one expects the greatest and most violent reaction, and a majority of them have said the matter was no longer an issue. This is roughly equivalent to a poll on Fox News in which 13,000 people called in to say George Bush ought to be impeached. In other words, it is a result that we ought to pay attention to.

In an unrelated story, late last month Teshkeel Comics, a new enterprise out of the United Arab Emirates, announced the creation of a new, Muslim-targeted comic book. This is not a Koran Illustrated sort of thing, but a superhero storyline called *The 99*. One common Islamic belief is that god manifests him or herself through 99 key attributes. The storyline involves the attrition of 69 of those attributes—30 are divine and thus are god's alone—in the persons of 69 individuals from various nations who do battle for, as the *New York Times* puts it, "Truth, Justice and the Islamic Way." Among these heroes are several women, none of whom wear burkas or even hijabs.

Wait a minute, you say. This must be the product of some westernized comics mogul who's unaware he's flagrantly violating Islamic scripture. Actually, the person behind the creation of *The 99* and behind Teshkeel Comics itself is Naif al-Mutawa, a Kuwaiti Muslim who grew up in New York City and attended Robin Hood Summer Camp in New Hampshire, which is where he was first introduced to comics. He points out that *The 99* will follow the Muslim belief that "power is ultimately god [who] has 99 key attributes... These attributes, if they all come together at one place, essentially become the unity of god."

But now, hold it, hold it, you say. Okay, so the guy's a Muslim but he must have been napping in the madrasah to have missed the very important point that depictions of the human form are un-Islamic.

Well, you see, no he wasn't. Yes it is, and no it isn't. Thus, in a nutshell, the ease with which Islam can be made confusing, not to say contradictory. There are many, many illustrations of Muhammad that have come down to us through the centuries, most of them the work of diligent, observant, Muslim artists. These are available to us today in beautiful, illustrated Korans from the time of the great Muslim ascendancy, about 700 years ago.

Is it simply a case of, if I do it, it's homage, but if you do it, it's offensive? In some sense, yes. But not really. But it does depend on who does it.

If there is one thing I hope you have learned in your years on this planet it is that everything is complicated. In fact, as science has constantly pointed out to us, everything is chaos. Except of course that which is not chaotic, the natural world. Nature operates in a consistent way: If you step outside while it's raining, you'll get wet. If you fast for several days, you'll be very hungry. Sura 29 identifies this consistency, the only consistency we can know, as Al-Lah (or "Most High God"): "And how many a living creature that does not carry its sustenance: Allah sustains it and yourselves; and he is the hearing, the knowing. And if you ask them, Who created the heavens and the earth and made the sun and the moon subservient, they will certainly say, Allah... And if you ask them, Who is it that sends down water from the clouds, then gives life to the earth with it after its death, they will certainly say, Allah." Allah is not only the alpha and the omega, as god is in Christianity: he is the totality. In Sura 55 we're told, "Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of Allah... All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide your Sustainer's Self, full of majesty and glory."

Armstrong points out, “When Muslims hear a sura chanted in the mosque, they are reminded of all the central tenets of their faith... Muslims say that when they hear the Koran chanted... they feel enveloped in a divine dimension of sound, rather as Muhammad was enveloped in the embrace of Gabriel on Mount Hira or when he saw the angel on the horizon no matter where he looked. It is not a book to be read simply to acquire information. It is meant to yield a sense of the divine, and must not be read in haste...” There is nothing outside Allah; all that exists not only owes its existence to Allah but *is* Allah. Al-Lah is the ultimate, unique reality.

The existence of Allah is never in question in the Koran: God simply is. The world is divided by Islam into two spheres. There is the group of the “unbelievers,” who are not atheists in the Western sense—that is, someone who does not believe in God—but are the ungrateful who see the miracle that is Allah but refuse to honor him for the same reason a willful child will refute his parents’ love. Mere spite.

The rest of the world is called the *ummah*, or the society of believers. As Sura 2 has it: “The fools among the people will say: What has turned them from their *qiblah* [or direction of prayer] which they had? Say: The East and the West belong only to Allah; He guides whom He likes to the right path. And thus we have made you a [just] nation that you may be the bearers of witness to the people and the Apostle may be a bearer of witness to you; and we did not make that which you would have to be the *qiblah* but that we might distinguish him who follows the Apostle from him who turns back upon his heels, and this was surely hard except for those whom Allah has guided aright; and Allah was not going to make your faith to be fruitless...” The *ummah* is the unified tribal community made up of Muslims, Jews and Christians, all right-thinking, monotheistic believers in a transcendent god who is nonetheless experienced here “below,” in the earthy realm where we dwell.

Armstrong again: “Yet from the start, Muslims saw revelation in less exclusive terms than either Jews or Christians. The intolerance that many people condemn in Islam today does not... spring from a rival vision of god but [because] Muslims are intolerant of injustice, whether it is committed by rulers of their own... or by the powerful Western countries. The Koran does not condemn other religious traditions as false or incomplete but shows each new prophet as confirming and continuing the insights of his predecessors. The Koran teaches that god had sent messengers to every people on the face of the earth: Islamic tradition says there had been 124,000 such prophets, a symbolic number suggesting infinitude. Thus the Koran repeatedly points out that it is not bringing a message that is essentially new and that Muslims must emphasize their kinship with the older [Jewish and Christian] religions...” Sura 29 reads: “And do not dispute with the followers of the Book except by what is best, except those of them who act unjustly, and say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him do we submit.”

It is important to note here that *Islam* itself translates to “submission,” but again, it is not necessarily the submission by which we in the West understand the word, that is as fealty to a master or a superior; rather, it is the sense of loyalty ones owes a parent or that an individual owes to his community.

Another Armstrong quote: “Like the Hebrew prophets, Muhammad preached an ethic that we might call socialist as a consequence of his worship of the one god. There were no obligatory doctrines about god: indeed, the Koran is highly suspicious of

theological speculation, dismissing it as *zanna*, self-indulgent guesswork about things that nobody can possibly know or prove. The Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity seemed prime examples of *zanna* and, not surprisingly, the Muslims found these notions blasphemous. Instead, . . . god was experienced as a moral imperative.”

God was all around for the believer and the *kafir* to see, if one only opened one’s eyes. Sura 2 again: “Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day, and the ships that run in the sea with that which profits men, and the water that Allah sends down from the cloud, then gives life with it to the earth after its death and spreads in it all kinds of animals, and the changing of the winds and the clouds made subservient between the heaven and the earth, there are signs for a people who understand.”

Armstrong reminds us, “The Koran constantly stresses the need for intelligence in deciphering the ‘signs’ or ‘messages’ of God. Muslims are not to abdicate their reason but to look at the world attentively and with curiosity. It was this attitude that later enabled Muslims to build a tradition of natural science, which has never been seen as such a danger to religion as [it has] in Christianity. A study of the workings of the natural world showed that it had a transcendent dimension and source, whom we can talk about only in signs and symbols: even the stories of the prophets, the accounts of the Last Judgment and the joys of paradise should not be interpreted literally but as parables of a higher, ineffable reality.”

Thus, you see, the contradiction in the Muslim world between those who would see the Koran as a spiritual guide and those who would use it as a user’s manual. This is much the same contradiction as we often see in Christianity or in Judaism or even among the Amish: Do we take god at his word or do we look a little more deeply into it?

The answer, as it almost always is, is political. “Politics is not extrinsic to a Muslim’s personal religious life. . . Muslims regard themselves as committed to implementing a just society in accord with God’s will. The *ummah* had sacramental importance, as a ‘sign’ that god has blessed this endeavor to redeem humanity from oppression and injustice; its political health holds much the same place in a Muslim’s spirituality as a particular theological option. . . in the life of a Christian.” This emphasis on political solutions “resulted in the formation of the *Shariah* law, a code similar to the Torah which was based on the Koran and the life and maxims of the Prophet. A bewildering number of oral traditions were in circulation about the words (*hadith*) and practice (*sunnah*) of Muhammad and his early companions. . . Because Muhammad was believed to have surrendered perfectly to God, Muslims were to imitate him in their daily lives. Thus by imitating the way Muhammad spoke, loved, ate, washed and worshipped, the Islamic Holy Law helped Muslims to live a life that was open to the divine. By modeling themselves on the Prophet, they hoped to acquire his interior receptivity to god. . . The external gestures are not to be regarded as ends in themselves but as a means of acquiring *taqwa*, the ‘god-consciousness’ prescribed by the Koran and practiced by the Prophet, which consists of a constant remembrance of god (*dhikr*). . . [By] stressing the divine nature of the Koran and the sunnah, [*Shariah*] provided each Muslim with the means of direct contact with god that was potentially subversive and highly critical of absolute power. There was no need for a caste of priests to act as mediators. Each Muslim was responsible before god for his or her own fate.”

God, while not inseparable from nature, is hidden within it. Politics and Shariah are a taste of God's existence. As we watch the news reports focusing on angry, chanting men setting ablaze, as they did yesterday, Danish consulates, or taking hostages, we need to recall that they are acting out a part of the political process of Islam and of Shariah, much the same way as Fred Phelps acts out a part of Christianity's political process with his war dead protests, but they are not Islam itself. Sura 9 reminds us, "Verily, god does not change men's condition unless they change their inner selves."

Muslims do not believe god is acting through these men any more than most Jews believe god acted through Baruch Goldstein when he opened fire inside a crowded mosque, or than most Christians believe god acted through Eric Rudolph when he set the bombs at Olympic Park. Human responsibility is paramount to the *ummah*. A final quote from Armstrong: "Muslims who believed that god was above mere human notions of right and wrong were decrying his justice. A god who violated all decent principles and got away with it simply because he was god would be a monster, no better than a tyrannical caliph...[Justice] was of the essence of god: he could not wrong anybody; he could not enjoin anything contrary to reason."

It is this experience of god, this mere taste of her justice, by which the ethical nature of humanity is safeguarded. But while many Muslims argue that these people we see on the news are acting out some part of *ummah*, most would also argue that it is no more necessary we pay attention to them than a parent ought to pay to a child's tantrum.