



Interfaith Youth Core

Our Common Life Together

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As an American Muslim, the daily news puts me in the position of having my loyalties constantly inspected. The ridiculing of the Prophet Muhammad in some European newspapers is the most recent case.

"Do you believe in free speech?" people ask me.

"To the teeth," I respond.

"Do you think that some sources in the West deliberately distort Islam?" they prod.

"Absolutely," I tell them.

"Are you hurt by the ridiculing of the Prophet in mainstream newspapers?" some wonder.

"Deep in my heart," I say.

After determining that my allegiances are multiple, they always say: "But your beliefs contradict each other. Which do you choose?"

They immediately dichotomize the discussion -- Western values vs. Muslim values, free speech vs. cultural sensitivity. They push to the point of polarization and then demand that I pick one side. But I refuse to fall prey to that mindset.

Viewing the world as sets of absolute principles at odds with each other plays into the hands of those who are working day and night to entrench the clash of civilizations and make it as bloody as possible. Some are undoubtedly whispering in the ears of right-wing politicians in Denmark, France and Germany, saying things like 'True Europeans are now more than ever ready to hear that we were not meant to live with these foreigners. Let's move to make Europe pure again.'

Their counterparts, fiery preachers in the Muslim world, are demanding the heads of European newspaper editors, telling their people that if Muslims do not go to war with the West, then the West will continue to insult Islam.

Sooner or later, we will see European tourists murdered by Muslim extremists and mosques set on fire by European racists.

The purists on both sides wrap themselves in the shroud of principle, sharpen their spears and aim for the eyes. Some reprint cartoons that they know are grossly offensive to the most sacred symbols of others. Some burn embassies and threaten violence. But globalization makes all of us intimates. The two sides think they are battling each other, but their volleys serve mostly to destroy the dream of a common life together.

Who is flying the flag of coexistence? Who is telling the story of pluralism? Who is pointing out that they are us?

So many missed opportunities in this situation. When they learned that they hurt part of their readership, the newspaper editors in Denmark could have simply apologized and asked to be educated about Muslim sacred symbols. More Muslims could have used this moment to teach the world that the Prophet's example was one of dignity, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Even Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League missed an opportunity. In a letter published in *The New York Times*, he wrote wrote: "newspapers in the Arab and Muslim world have no moral scruples when it comes to demonizing and stereotyping Jews in editorial cartoons."

Of course he is right. Whenever Muslims destroy what is precious to others, they hurt their brothers and sisters and defile the spirit of Islam.

But Mr. Foxman had an opportunity to do something more important than be right. He had a chance to be righteous. When the Montgomery Bus Boycott was nearing its end, Martin Luther King Jr. could well have shoved his victory in the face of white segregationists. Instead, he called on his own people to lead mutual reconciliation efforts towards the creation of what he called 'the beloved community'.

Imagine if Mr. Foxman had used the considerable power of his perch to simply say that he wished people wouldn't defile sacred symbols. He would have created a whole new set of friends and pointed us towards a viable future together.

But such moves are rare in these polarized times. The closest example I've seen came from an Evangelical Christian who works for the interfaith organization I run. In a staff meeting, he listened quietly as people hashed through the traditional arguments.

And then he said: "I remember how deeply hurt I was a few years ago by art that desecrated Christian symbols. I think I know how Muslims feel about this. I want to tell them I wish that they hadn't been hurt."

No treatise on free speech. No lecture on cultural sensitivity. Just a guy from one group reaching across a seemingly unbridgeable chasm with his palm up.

I had two thoughts when he said that. The first: Put that guy on CNN, or better yet, Al Jazeera. Let people in Pakistan and Syria know that an American Evangelical Christian is trying to understand something about them.

The second: I wonder if that gesture of generosity was more a Muslim value or a Western one? I'm on both sides, again.