Editorial

When the tribes of Makkah decided to rebuild the Ka`bah, they worked together well until it was time to return the Black Stone to its corner. Each clan wanted the honor of this task, and tensions ran high for four or five days due to the stalemate over who would have the honor of lifting the Black Stone so that it could be returned to its proper place. With battle preparations underway, one man decided to try and avert a fight by suggesting a rather unorthodox idea: The first man to walk into the area would be appointed to arbitrate the dispute. Everyone agreed and began to wait. And so it was that Muhammad ibn Abdullah was the first to enter. Seeing this, the men reached a spontaneous agreement that he was indeed the best one to resolve this crisis, for he was known to all of them as a person of truth. Muhammad analyzed the situation and then asked for a cloak. Telling them to spread it out on the ground, he asked each clan to take hold of a corner. After placing the Black Stone in the middle, he asked them to raise the cloak so that he could place the Black Stone back in its proper place.

This was Muhammad ibn Abdullah, a man of truth, integrity, and peace; a man who, according to Muslim belief, later became the last Prophet of God. Muhammad ibn Abdullah: about whom Muslims say "*salla Allahu `alayhi wasallam*" (May the peace and blessings of God be upon him) each time his name is mentioned; about whom they ask God to bless, just as He had blessed Abraham his family, at each of the five daily prayers; about whom it is said that God say ten prayers on anyone who says one prayer on him. In contrast with the 1,400 year old Muslim tradition of reverence toward Muhammad ibn Abdullah (pbuh), (indeed toward all of the prophets), a European tradition gradually sprung up dedicated to depicting Muhammad ibn Abdullah as an evil "magician" out to destroy Christendom. Pope Innocent III (1161-1216) even called him the Anti-Christ. During the medieval era, the bogey used to frighten naughty children into obedience was "Mahomet."

This negative image of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) remains deeply ingrained in the European psyche (and, by extension, the colonized New World, now known as "the West"). Indeed, it is so deeply ingrained that

western culture took it up after the rise of secularism. People these days may care less about the Anti-Christ from a religious point of view, but the taint of being evil has stuck in the western memory of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The secular academic study of religion and the rise of multiculturalism in the West have opened up new, more empathetic vistas over the last ten years. Karen Armstrong's sensitively drawn biography of the Prophet (pbuh), *Muhammad: A Western Attempt To Understand Islam*, is a good example. But clearly the negative imagery retains a strong hold on the western imagination.

It is very disappointing, to say the least, to see the traditional negative European images of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) being resurrected in the European press, this time under the (dis)guise of the cartoon genre and as an example of "freedom of expression." While much can be said about Islam and its relationship (or non-relationship) to supposedly hallmark values of tolerance in western civilization, I want to focus my remarks here on the more general way in which the cartoon incident becomes another "event" in the tragic and ongoing miscommunication between Muslims and the West.

While I was outraged at the cartoons, I was equally upset by the violent response on the part of some Muslims. Such violence, as numerous Muslim scholars and leaders have stated, is totally un-Islamic. Our Prophet (pbuh) was a man who used to let a woman throw garbage on him when he passed by her house, only to go and inquire after her health when she did not do so for a few days. However, to have to talk about it in a way designed to point out what Islam says about freedom of expression, or violence, or whatever value the West holds dear, is to miss the point. Moreover, it is to misread the political and historical context that allows the publication of a cartoon to become an "event" in a series of events.

Typically, rioting Muslims are portrayed as religiously inspired fanatics who adhere to a religion that is intolerant, against freedom, and unable to take a joke. A colleague e-mailed me to find out if Muslims were really offended, because someone on his discussion list had argued that the Muslim response was simply political manipulation. To dismiss Muslim claims to offence so easily and blithely is yet another variation on the European historical memory of Muhammad (pbuh) and everything for which he stood. Since the Muslims' image of reverence, awe, and humility toward the Prophet (pbuh) is missing in the European psyche, offence at his characterization as a warmonger cannot be comprehended. Thus, the Muslims' response must be due to their tendency toward heated irrational passion that is easily whipped up by radical leaders.

The other character in the play is never drawn or explored. But consider this: In response to the cartoons, anti-Muslim sentiment in the West is on the rise. The latest poll in the United States to gauge American views of Islam and Muslims shows a rise in the number of Americans who have held negative perceptions of Islam since the 9/11 attacks. "According to the poll, the proportion of Americans who believe that Islam helps to stoke violence against non-Muslims has more than doubled since the attacks, from 14 percent in January 2002 to 33 percent today."[1] *Doubled since 9/11*.

And negative sentiment leads directly to physical attacks. Hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs, or anyone even resembling them are on the rise. And yet this irony is never explored – "Your religion preaches hate and intolerance. I can't believe people would riot over a cartoon. Don't you guys know anything about freedom of expression? About tolerance? You just don't belong in the civilized world. I hate you. Here, take what is coming to you (punch)." If this seems far-fetched, consider the latest attacks on Muslims at the University of Toronto. In March 2006, a fourth-year Muslim woman student wearing hijab was followed into the bathroom by two women. One woman shoved a flyer at her, pushing her back and telling her: "You need this. You're a Muslim." The flyer was advertising a rally in support of the Danish media's publication of the cartoons. When the young woman threw the flyer away, her assailant asked her why and began yelling at her: "Go back to [your] f***** country and bomb it." In addition, she kept yelling: 'F****** Muslim terrorists." That same week, some other young hijab-wearing women had eggs thrown at them. Support for the war on terror comes out of this hatred toward Muslims.

This western intolerance and hatred of Islam and Muslims is never typecast in the West as springing from "westernness," from western identity. Rather, it is considered an aberration. Or, more precisely an individualized or compartmentalized incident – the so-and-so who committed this hate crime – which is then juxtaposed to the de-individualized rioting mobs of Muslims.

Some have argued the problem is that secular people cannot understand the meaning of sacredness. But this is not true. Secularists have sacredness, bit it is invested in different symbols. Just try to burn an American flag in the United States and see what happens! (Indeed in June 2005, the House of Representatives passed an amendment to the Constitution that, if passed by the Senate, will make burning the flag an act of desecration.) If an Iraqi youth burns an American flag, both the

burner and the "burnee" know that a symbol of American political power is being attacked and that such an act is offensive. The Iraqi youth chooses to burn the flag, and not the Bible, because he is aware, even if subconsciously, that this is the right symbol to pick if he wants to stir up the American public's emotions. The Danish newspaper that originally published the cartoons, along with the European and other newspapers that republished them, were fully aware of the offensive nature of this act. Some newspaper editors "are on record stating that they published the cartoons as an act of defiance against 'radical Islam.'" (Rachard Itani, "Cartoons and Hypocrisy: Danes Finally Apologize to Muslims [But for the Wrong Reasons]," www.counterpunch.org.)

While most westerners may not be aware of their anti-Prophet literary heritage (for example, how many know that in Dante's Inferno Mohammed [pbuh] is placed in the ninth circle of Hell?), most Muslims are. And so what we have are wounded feelings being re-hurt time and time again. Muslim reactions to these insults are cast into the pre-existent stereotype of the "intolerant and violent Muslim," but the riots caused by this cartoon must be read in a politicized way, taking into account local contexts (e.g., Syrians feeling the heat of a possible American invasion, Pakistanis dismayed at American military violence in the war on terror on their soil, and so on). Westerners attack Muslims out of their proclaimed disgust with Islamic "values" – and the cycle continues.

The role of revenge in this ongoing conflict is seriously understudied. And so the chasm between Muslims and the West is continually reaching new lows. One sometimes wonders how much lower these relations can go. As a result, those of us in the middle who are seeking to build bridges and contribute to a world of peaceful exchange and mutual respect constantly find the ground being cut out under their feet ... by both sides.

The (re)/constant depiction of Muslims as uncivilized is easily dispelled by even a cursory glance at Islamic history. Two articles in this issue speak tangentially to this: M. Abdul-Huk's "The Humanistic Note in Iqbal" and Yasien Mohamed's "The Islamic Philosophy of Labor and Crafts: The View of the Ikhwan al-Safa', Isfahani, and Ibn Khaldun." Allama Iqbal, known as Pakistan's poet-philosopher, reflected in his beautiful poetry a soul shaped by many influences, including Islam. As a result, his poetry demonstrates a sensitivity that one does not expect to find in the stereotypical "intolerant Muslim." (This is a reprint of a booklet published by the author for limited circulation among his family and close friends.) Huk argues that Iqbal was able to reconcile humanism and religious faith. This would be quite a feat,

especially if Islam were meant to be a religion that is as backward as is claimed via the cartoon incident.

Yasein's examination of the Ikhwan al-Safa', Isfahani, and Ibn Khaldun on the meaning of labor and crafts is also instructive in this regard. Their philosophical discussions of labor are very sophisticated and, in many ways, prefigure the views of Adam Smith, Marx, and other western theorists who have addressed the issue. Labor is praised for its industriousness and antidote to sloth (Queen Victoria would have been pleased). Crafts are defined in relation to existing lifestyles: simple vs. complex. Therefore Isfahani, a tenth-century Persian philosopher, categorized agriculture, weaving, building, and ruling as essential crafts, and baking, embroidery, decoration, and law as aesthetic crafts. Truly, such philosophical investigations are not possible in the barren and violence-prone religion claimed via the cartoon incident.

Aliaa Ibrahim Dakroury's "Toward a Philosophical Approach of the Hermeneutics of the Qur'an," is in the same vein. She presents a careful argument considering how one can carry out a hermeneutical study of the Qur'an by drawing on the theories of Habermas, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Dakroury argues that even non-Muslims, provided that they fulfill such prerequisites as sincerity and having a fore-knowledge of Muslim cultures, will find their interpretations of the Qur'an accepted by the Muslim community. S. Sayyid's "Rituals, Ideals, and Reading the Qur'an," while exploring similar issues of the Qur'an and its interpretation, comes to a different conclusion: Any interpretation coming from those who do not follow Islam must be resisted, for those who engage in such an activity must regard what is considered sacred as sacred. Sayyid makes this point as part of his larger argument that interpreting the Qur'an must be depoliticized. For him, the Qur'an's meaning must always be contained as part of a "promise" – part of the human yearning to reach the Divine, and thus never "fixed" or settled.

While reaching different conclusions with respect to non-Muslims who try to interpret the Qur'an, both Dakroury and Sayyid are, from another perspective, also making similar points about its "meaning." Thus, Islamophobes who claim that Islam is evil must be rejected both because their interpretation fails to meet the preconditions suggested by Dakroury, and because of their lack of identity with the faith, as recommended by Sayyid.

One area in which Islam is receiving a lot of attention, though without a trickle-down effect to the general public, is Islamic finance. In recent

years, western capitalist banks have begun to offer Shari`ah-compliant banking for their Muslim customers. This is good business for them, since Muslims seeking to avoid interest-based banking represent a huge potential market of mostly untapped wealth. Islamic financial theory has much to offer the world, as evidenced by "The Time Value of Money Concept in Islamic Finance," a joint article by Abu Umar Faruq Ahmad and M. Kabir Hassan.

With Third World debt crippling many developing countries' economies, it is easy to see the injustices inherent in a capitalist economy based on the time value of money as a commodity. Islamic financial theory proposes that money is not a commodity that can be bought and sold, for the lender must share proportionally in the resulting profit or loss. Under capitalism, however, an interest-bearing loan always ensures that the lender makes a profit, even when the borrower faces total financial ruin. In such a cause, the investor will lose neither the initial loan nor the guaranteed interest-based income. As Ahmad and Hassan rightfully conclude, such an outcome is a "glaring injustice." Again, the humane financial system that Islam offers to the world is a far cry from its horrible image as portrayed by those who mock the cartoon episode.

This issue's forum section features a piece by Louay Safi, the previous editor of AJISS. While the cartoon commotion is the issue of the hour, another controversy always seems to be lurking nearby, ready to break out yet again: the "fate" of Muslim women. The latest outbreak in this area is the question of whether a woman can serve as the imam of a mixed-gender Friday congregational prayer, as Amina Wudud did recently. Safi's essay recognizes the unjust exclusion that many Muslim women face due to one particular unfortunate development afflicting the North American Muslim scene: The desire of many immigrant Muslims who come from strongly patriarchal cultures to try to reproduce these defective and harmful structures in North America. He argues that the Qur'an and Sunnah demand that women be fully involved in their local mosques, just as they were during the Prophet's (pbuh) time. However, he asserts, the solution is not to be found in the more revolutionary acts of women leading mixed-gender public congregational Friday prayers, but rather in the middle ground between the conservative and liberal extremes.

I would like to announce here that this year's special issue will deal with Islam and Muslims in Central and Southeast Asia. The Board of Directors of IIIT and AMSS, realizing that both regions have not received their due atten-

tion, as even a cursory reading of the western media will show, would like to at least start rectifying the deficit of knowledge, even among Muslims, when it comes to understanding and dealing with these large Muslim populations. Please see the "Call for Papers" right across from the beginning of the editorial and send us your research.

Katherine Bullock

Endnotes

1. Claudia Deane and Darryl Fears, "Negative Perception Of Islam Increasing: Poll Numbers in U.S. Higher Than in 2001," *Washington Post*, 9 March 2006, p. A01. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/08/AR-2006030802221.html