

The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 22 Mar 2008

## Freedom and sensitivity

**Belittling the Prophet in such a way clearly smacks of thorough ignorance of his position in Islamic and world history.**

By Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

I recently took a look at the caricature that started it all. More than two years old now, it continues to be the battleground where the world is ranging to fight the battle for the freedom of expression. I am, of course, talking about the famous caricature of Mohammed that was published on September 30, 2005 in the Danish daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.

There were eleven other cartoons published that day poking fun at various aspects of Islam - covering one entire page of the newspaper - but the one that stands out is the cartoon of Mohammed (shown as a ferocious Arab, with a straight long nose, a very thick beard and thicker eyebrows, and fierce glaring eyes; his turban is bulbous and segues into a large cannon ball with a lit fuse and on its front is the Islamic *shahadah*).

The cartoons have been republished several times, most recently in some Danish newspapers, reigniting tempers and leading to a flurry of e-mail activity. While much of the reportage of events following publication of the cartoons has represented the issue as another demonstration of Islamic intolerance, the issue is more complicated than this. There needs to be a deeper understanding of the position of Mohammed in Islamic hagiography to understand why Muslims were so distressed by these cartoons.

The protests also remind me of two other instances when Muslims responded violently to derogatory representations of the Prophet. The first is fairly recent; 1988. Salman Rushdie had published his book *The Satanic Verses* in which he freely lampooned Mohammed and his wives.

In response, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa* calling for the

death of Rushdie and Muslims in Britain bombed book stores that sold the book. Publishers were threatened and the Japanese translator of the book was stabbed to death. India was one of the first countries to ban the book and when Mushirul Hasan, the current Vice Chancellor of Jamia Milia Islamia University, came out in defence of Rushdie's freedom of expression he was not allowed to teach in his university for four years because of protests from students and some Muslims politicians.

In these two cases what we see is that there is a conflict between the "freedom of expression" and "religious feeling" when it comes to representation of the Prophet in certain ways. Why is that? Is Islam inherently intolerant? To answer this question we have to look at the position of the Prophet in Islam.

For Muslims, Mohammed is the most perfect embodiment of all the ideas of Islam as well as being the last prophet of Islam. While Muslims do not worship Mohammed they try to emulate his actions (*sunnat*) and every time his name is uttered it is always followed by a reverential "Peace Be Upon Him". He was the chosen messenger of *Allah* to whom the Holy Quran was revealed. So when anyone says/

writes/ expresses anything that can be perceived to be insulting Mohammed at any level it tends to be received as an affront to the most sacred person in Islam.

In Western popular culture, much of which thrives on the freedom of expression, Jesus has become a common object of ridicule - an example of what happens when there are no checks on freedom of expression. Jesus has been commonly featured in popular American animated sitcoms like *South Park* (where Jesus is a recurring character as a talk show host of Jesus and Pals and is killed off in an episode), *Family Guy* (in one episode he is shown fighting gangsters a la a Hollywood action hero) and *The Simpsons* (where there is a Dancing Jesus, a take on the popular Dancing Baby screensaver). Thus, what we are seeing here is a complete trivialisation of religious figures in popular culture, a situation that many Muslims will simply not tolerate because of the exalted position that Mohammed occupies in the Islamic faith.

The issue of freedom of expression, especially when it involves the creative expression of the author, can be extremely controversial but violent responses cannot be condoned. While there certainly cannot be a blanket ban on the freedom of expression there must be a better understanding of the subject matter being dealt with and efforts must be made to be sensitive about others feelings.

And contrary to popular belief, Muslims are using the freedom of expression to laugh at themselves (as evident from the recent trend of Muslim stand up comics, the most prominent of whom are the American group *Allah Made Me Funny*) but are doing it with a through understanding of Islam. In the case of the Danish cartoon, the cartoonist suggests a very clear link between terrorism and Mohammed. And belittling such a great man in such a way clearly smacks of thorough ignorance of his position in Islamic and world history.

