

Chapter 19. Art to die for.

*Good art makes you think.*¹

*This crime called blasphemy was invented by priests for the purpose of defending doctrines not able to take care of themselves.*² Robert Ingersoll

The collision of art, free speech and religion is enlightening. Historically, in Western countries, art and free speech usually win. The situation is reversed in Muslim countries, where “blasphemy” is often a crime.³ But the trend is shifting. Religionists’ reaction to art which is legal, but offends their religious mores, often shifts into superlegal action—supernaturally authorized illegal acts (see Chapter 21). The use of religion to justify illegal activities, including murder, for often innocuous art, is one of the most shocking and unjustifiable functions of religion.

In 2004, Theo Van Gogh, a distant relative of artist Vincent Van Gogh, directed a ten-minute English language film called “Submission.” “Submission” is a literal translation of the word “Islam.” The screenplay was written by a Somali-born refugee who fled an arranged marriage and eventually became a member of the Dutch Parliament. The film shows four women, who while praying, describe the physical and sexual abuse they have suffered from men. The women have verses from the Koran written on their skin and are wearing transparent garments.⁴

The verses from the Koran included:

*Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great.*⁵

*They ask thee concerning women’s courses. Say: They are a hurt and a pollution: So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.*⁶

*(As for) the fornicatress and the fornicator, flog each of them, (giving) a hundred stripes, and let not pity for them detain you in the matter of obedience to Allah, if you believe in Allah and the last day, and let a party of believers witness their chastisement.*⁷

Following the airing of the film, both Van Gogh and the author of the screenplay, Hirsi Ali, were threatened with death. Ms. Ali already had police protection. Van Gogh declined police protection and told Ms. Ali, “if they kill me, remember the rule of law has to be protected against extremists.”⁸

In November 2004, on a city street in broad daylight, a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim man shot Van Gogh six times, slit his throat, and then pinned a six-page letter to his body with a knife.⁹ The letter declared jihad against Holland, Europe and the United States and included this statement (translated from Dutch):

Islam will be victorious through the blood of the martyrs. They will spread its light in every dark corner of this earth and it will drive evil, with the sword if necessary, back into its dark hole. This struggle which has burst forth is different than those of the past. The unbelieving fundamentalists have started it and Inshallah the true believers will end it.

There will be no mercy shown to the purveyors of injustice, only the sword will be lifted against them. No discussions, no demonstrations, no petitions; DEATH will separate the Truth from the Lies.

Verse: Be warned that the death that you are trying to prevent will surely find you, afterwards you will be taken back to the All Knowing and He will tell you what you attempted to do.¹⁰

The story of Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard has also become well known. Westergaard drew a political cartoon showing the face of a bearded man with a bomb in his turban. The bomb was a simple black circle, the kind you would see in a child's cartoon, with a lit fuse. Dutch newspaper Jyllands-Posten (Jyllands Post) ran the cartoon as part of a series of 12 in 2005. The editor commented:

I commissioned the cartoons in response to several incidents of self-censorship in Europe caused by widening fears and feelings of intimidation in dealing with issues related to Islam . . . over two weeks we witnessed a half-dozen cases of self-censorship, pitting freedom of speech against the fear of confronting issues about Islam. This was a legitimate news story to cover, and Jyllands-Posten decided to do it by adopting the well-known journalistic principle: Show, don't tell. I wrote to members of the association of Danish cartoonists asking them "to draw Muhammad as you see him."

* * *

As a former correspondent in the Soviet Union, I am sensitive about calls for censorship on the grounds of insult. This is a popular trick of totalitarian movements: Label any critique or call for debate as an insult and punish the offenders. That is what happened to human rights activists and writers such as Andrei Sakharov, Vladimir Bukovsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Natan Sharansky, Boris Pasternak. The regime accused them of anti-Soviet propaganda, just as some Muslims are labeling 12 cartoons in a Danish newspaper anti-Islamic.

*The lesson from the Cold War is: If you give in to totalitarian impulses once, new demands follow. The West prevailed in the Cold War because we stood by our fundamental values and did not appease totalitarian tyrants.*¹¹

Two Danish imams added photos of a French comedian wearing a pig nose at a pig calling contest and other materials to the cartoons and distributed them at a Muslim summit in Mecca, leading to protests across the Muslim world, including 70,000 gathered in Pakistan.¹² Ensuing riots resulted in the deaths of as many as 200 people and millions of dollars in damages.¹³ The simple cartoon has resulted in at least two Muslim attempts to murder Westergaard. His house has been modified to include a “safe room” that saved him in a 2009 attack and \$3.9 million has been spent protecting him.¹⁴ Westergaard commented, “I realize that when issues of religion are involved emotions run high, and all religions have their symbols, which possess great importance . . . But when you live in a secularized society, it’s clear that religion can’t demand some sort of special status . . . I have a problem with the fact that we have people from another culture who don’t accept that we use religious elements in a drawing.”¹⁵

On an anniversary reprinting of the cartoons, the Vatican issued a joint statement with a Sunni Muslim University condemning--*not* the riots, deaths and death threats to the cartoonist, but the publication of the cartoon. It read, “Both sides vehemently denounce the reprinting of the offensive cartoon and the attack on Islam and its prophet. We call for the respect of faiths, religious holy books and religious symbols. Freedom of expression should not become a pretext to insult religions and defaming [*sic*] religious sanctities.”¹⁶

Attempted murder of cartoonists drawing Mohammed is not a one time thing. In 2007, Swedish artist Lars Vilks, as part of an exhibition about the dog in art, drew three sketches of Mohammed’s head on a dog’s body. The exhibition withdrew the pictures before displaying them because of the fear of violence. Vilks then submitted them to a teacher’s exhibition at an art school where he lectures. The school rejected the pictures for security concerns. Finally, several newspapers printed the pictures.

A group called “al-Qaeda in Iraq” has offered a \$100,000 bounty for killing Vilks, with a 50% bonus if his throat is slit “like a lamb.”¹⁷ In March 2010, Irish authorities arrested a group of seven who were planning to kill Vilks.¹⁸ Two American women were involved in the plot.¹⁹ Vilks has been attacked while giving a lecture and arsonists have tried to burn his home.²⁰

Even the satirical cartoon show *South Park* is not immune. The cartoonists did not draw Mohammed, but rather provided his voice from the back of a moving van and from inside a bear costume. An American Muslim²¹ posted an Internet warning that the *South Park* cartoonists will probably end up dead like Theo Van Gogh, and put the cartoonists’ addresses on the Internet.²² The network broadcasting the show, Comedy Central, responded by bleeping out all references to Mohammed in the second of two episodes that featured Mohammed’s voice.²³ In response, an Internet user suggested that May 20, 2010 be declared “everybody draw Mohammed day,” an idea others enthusiastically adopted.²⁴ The Secular Student Alliance posted advice and sample drawings on its Website.²⁵ Time will tell if this mass-response to religious censorship of art will be effective.

Killing for art is a uniquely religious characteristic. The Muslims have taken anger over perceived blasphemy and made it cause for international murder schemes. They are successfully censoring free speech in countries where it is protected. For example, Jytte Klausen wrote a book about the Danish cartoons titled, *The Cartoons that Shook the World*. Naturally, she included images of the cartoons. The publisher, Yale University Press, owned by Yale University, removed the cartoons from the book, as well as other images of Mohammed. Yale University Press announced, "The decision rested solely on the experts' assessments that there existed a substantial likelihood of violence that might take the lives of innocent victims."²⁶

A storied American University allowed fear of superlegal violence by religious adherents to override freedom of speech. This is a dangerous aspect of religion.

And before Christian religionists start feeling too smug about their liberalism, an award winning photograph by Andres Serrano entitled "Piss Christ," which showed a plastic crucifix in hazy yellow liquid the artist said was his urine brought about violence, but not murder. When shown in Australia, on one day a patron tried to rip it off the wall and on another day, two men attacked it with a hammer, succeeding in getting the photo removed from the exhibition.²⁷

Similarly, in the U.S., a portrait of Jesus' mother that included elephant dung and pornographic images was smeared with white paint at the Brooklyn Museum of Art because the vandal found it "blasphemous."²⁸ Admittedly, no one died in the actions of the Christians, yet they felt beliefs entitled them to violate the law to censor art.

Good art makes you think. But with their angry and sometimes violent response to thought-provoking art, it appears that religionists are afraid of thinking.

Fish legs and atheist riots.

Nowadays, when you hear about a suicide bomber, an airline hijacker, or a riot, as often as not, religion plays a role. When is the last time you heard of an atheist riot?

Religionists like to portray themselves as a defenseless minority being persecuted by powerful atheist groups. But as described in Chapter 2, it is really the other way around. A small but telling example of this is the fact that there is a need to sell plastic "fish legs" to replace the legs religionists feel entitled to break off "Darwin fish" on atheists' cars. Greater in number, greater in power, some religionists find it humorous to destroy another person's property and censor that person's right to free speech. Atheists are not trying to censor the religionists, religionists are trying to censor the atheists. Who acts like they are right?

If you published a political cartoon depicting an atheist, nothing would happen. A search on google results in countless atheist cartoons. Now perform the same search for Mohammed. There are only a few. The violent reaction of Muslim religionists censors free speech even in countries that guarantee it.

Religionists believe their myths give them superlegal powers to attack and even murder artists who

produce work the religionists do not like. This dangerous perception of privilege is a disturbing symptom of the problems with religion.

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