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As an American journalist who holds freedom of speech and press personally sacred, I'm chilled by the recent mayhem over publication of cartoons satirizing the Prophet Muhammad. Yet, while I detest and dread the violence currently waxing out of control in the Islamic world – which, increasingly, is the whole world – on this particular matter, I'm with the offended Muslims. Although some on each side portray this as a titanic collision between religion and freedom of the press, I don't think it's about press freedom at all.

Suppose I'm convinced that a sitting president of Poland is corrupt. If I expose him in the press, that's both my right as a citizen and my obligation as a journalist. In fact, if I write an opinion column, I can also call him an evil jerk. As an individual, he's fair game (and so am I: He can sue me and win, if my accusations are groundless.) In other words, with reason I can go after a specific Pole – but I can't ethically print a Polish joke that slurs all Polish people. The former makes me a journalist, but the latter makes me a racist.

If I find Iranian President Ahmedinejad scary, I can report what he says and let his words speak for themselves, or I can editorialize why I think he's creepy. But I'd be just as odious if I vilified every Iranian – or every Muslim. That's just what those cartoons did, by not aiming at him or Bin-Laden or the late Ayatollah Khomeini or Saddam Hussein, but at someone Muslims revere the way Christians worship Jesus, and who thus stands for them all.

To westerners, it may seem odd that the offense was not just depicting Muhammad as a terrorist, but depicting him at all – how are we supposed to know all the arcane laws of someone else's religion, when our own often have more rules than we can remember? The rage, however, isn't over some editor's innocent mistake. The Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten*, a right-wing publication in a country where anti-immigration politics lately rule and overtly racist candidates have polled strongly, essentially dared, via written invitation, enough – 25 – cartoonists to draw Muhammad that it was assured that someone would. The Norwegian magazine that sparked the furor by reprinting the results is not part of mainstream media, but a small Christian publication. Christians and right-wingers deserve equal press freedom like everyone else – but if they violate norms against defamation and hate language that responsible media observe, they can't insist that defenders of press freedom must also protect them from the wrath they incite by deliberately blaspheming an entire creed.

Of course, when that wrath spills over onto the rest of us, we end up having to protect ourselves against their enemies: exactly the response they hoped to instigate.

Some Jewish friends – I am Jewish – argue that Islam deserves no respectful treatment, because the Qur'an says Muslims are supposed to slay Jews. If you don't have the Qur'an handy, on the Internet you'll find web pages claiming that Allah orders everything from roasting Jewish infidels alive to restoring the promised land of Israel to them. Like the Bible, people interpret it as suits them. Rather than choose among dueling translations, I'd prefer to consider some facts. For more than seven centuries, and at Muslim invitation, Jews and Muslims lived and prospered together in Moorish Spain, creating some of history's great cultural, mathematical, and scientific advances. That lasted until Christians drove the Muslims out and Christian Inquisitors actually did roast Jews at the stake, and worse. Yet today, Christians and Jews mostly co-exist in peace, despite vast disagreement over the fundamental tenet of Christ's divinity. On that point, however, Muslims don't disagree at all. They rank Jesus right up with Muhammad – and

Abraham, Moses, and David as well. All were God's prophets, and all their books are holy.

So why is the world newly engulfed in spreading flames? Because power-mongers on all sides profit by fomenting hatred. Some revile their adversaries as freedom haters – including press freedom – when it serves their needs, then just as quickly obstruct journalists, or jail them, or accidentally shoot them, when that proves expedient. Others brand all reporters as spies or blasphemers, then kidnap and behead them because they say God says so. Together, they thrive on polarization and division, and now they want to seize an ugly moment to divide western journalists from all Muslims. I'm not buying it.

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