

Muslims can say anything. Christians should rejoice in their Lord.

by Marten de Vries

Editor's note: Rev. Marten de Vries is a Reformed minister in Rotterdam and is regularly engaged in conversations with Muslims. This article first appeared in an abridged form in Dutch in the *Nederlands Dagblad* of Monday 13th February 2006 under the heading 'Cartoons kans voor gesprek met moslims' (Cartoons Offer an Opportunity for Conversation with Muslims).

Much has been said and written in the Christian press as a result of the controversial Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Many people have pointed out that Christians also are mocked and slandered. They are used to it; as followers of Jesus Christ, they react differently. They, in contrast to Muslims, do not feel *personally* hurt when their Saviour is scoffed at. They do suffer for this – just as they do when they are laughed at – but they do not curse in return. They may protest, but they do not threaten and they do not use physical violence; nor do they notify the police and call for prosecution. Instead, they ensure only that they are not suffering justifiable abuse for not behaving as Christians should (*see* 1 Peter 4 from verse 12 onwards).

Christians distance themselves from the cartoons because, in their love for Muslims, they do not seek to be strong by making the religion of others look ridiculous. A Christian may show a little humour, especially through a bit of self-mockery and putting things into perspective.¹ He or she may even use satire (*see* Isaiah 44 where people make a god for themselves out of a piece of

wood which serves as firewood for others). Or they may express bitter mockery as did Elijah on Mount Carmel when he suggested that Baal was deep in thought, busy or asleep. But these Bible passages cannot possibly be used as an excuse for deliberately presenting offensive questions or criticisms of Islam. They are, at best, for use only among Christians when baptised believers try to exchange the one true God for something which cannot be a god. Mocking is completely counter-productive when we desire to spread the 'sweet savour of Christ' among Muslims.

Ideal

Honesty forces us to say that our practice as Christians has not always lived up to the ideal.

What some Christians have done to each other has also often been contrary to scriptural principles. At one time Catholics condemned Protestants to be burned.

Unfortunately, some of the great reformers spoke in belittling terms of others. We may desire to distance ourselves just as much from the Crusades as from Augustine's misuse of state power in his struggle with the North African Christians who were followers of Donatism. Even today, in their condemnation of Muslims, some Christians prefer to let themselves be motivated by their own primitive

instincts rather than by the correcting principles of the Gospel.

On the other hand, we note that many Muslims are not only saddened by the current commotion, but they are also utterly ashamed of it. They are aware of insincerity in their own circles. Political anger and frustration is being packaged as religious offence. One Muslim mother wrote that all those Muslims who name their child 'Muhammad' and who do not go on to bring the child up 'in the fear of Allah', reveal just as little respect for their own prophet. Other Muslims point to the example of Muhammad himself when he used to ignore such insulting behaviour.

Dhimmis

It has already been pointed out that Muslims have been guilty of similar attacks on others. Sickening anti-Semitic satirical cartoons existed long before the Arabic European Liga of Diyab Abou Jahja published these recent ones as a reaction to the challenged issue of *Jyllands-Posten*.² Both inside and outside of the Middle East, drawings have been circulating in which Western political leaders are being dragged through the mud. Also, some Muslims are not diffident about ridiculing Christianity or discriminating against its followers.

What Christians have done or neglected to do may be embarrassing, but it is characteristic of Islam to see non-Muslims as *dhimmis*, second-class citizens, in those countries where Muslims are in control. Christians are by no means always persecuted except for when we are talking of Muslim back-

ground believers. Public ceremonies by Christians take place in Islamic countries, although officially they may be forbidden. In any case, missionary activity is punished and a falling away from Islam is seen as criminal behaviour and treated as such. These actions are in sharp contrast with the rights Muslims vehemently claim for themselves in the West.

Incest recommended?

The content and the symbols of the Christian religion are deliberately mis-treated. Muslim demonstrators showed great pleasure in trampling on the Danish flag with its cross! It is childish to say, 'This is allowed because they did it too'. In any case, such actions do not exemplify principles of respect.

Often, the Bible (the Old and New Testament) is the object of bitter abuse, while the Qur'an is put above any criticism. Now, of course, there are some Muslims, especially in the post-modern Western society, who think that open questions may be asked of the Qur'an. But biting criticism of their holy book would not be tolerated. Meanwhile, not only in some mosques, but also in busy shopping streets in the Netherlands, books are for sale in which terrible things about the Bible are printed. They will say it is not about the original Bible, which is now non-existent for them. However, this Bible is the Holy Scriptures for Christians today.

Here are some examples that Muslims give. They say that the Bible of the church is corrupt. Their proof is the inclusion of pornographic passages and the recommendation of incest and rape

found in the biblical histories. They add that the faith of Christians is ridiculous because of the incarnation where Jesus is God. So as a human being, God was hungry, ate, drank and went to the toilet! Notwithstanding, a Muslim will use Bible texts which are useful for him to confirm that Islam is right.

Muslims say anything they like about Christianity. Imagine the commotion there would be if somebody started criticizing the Qur'an in this manner! Actually, there are evangelists who work like this. But Muslims have been known to flare up in great indignation at the very idea of using selections from the Qur'an to underline Christian doctrine.

Offensive

Now we cannot deny Muslims the right to ask questions. When these are asked out of interest or lack of understanding, I am personally glad for them; they offer a chance to witness.

We must remember that the Gospel in itself is a stumbling block! The Bible says the very same thing and not without reason. God appeared in the flesh; Jesus humbled Himself to become one of us – with all that this entails. God's Son was born as a man, not only from the pure virgin Mary, but remember that there were also prostitutes further back in the family tree. A naked Jesus hung on the cross. Indeed, there was no beauty or majesty in His appearance that would lead us to desire Him. The incarnation gives rise to strong reactions, more emotional than the questions Christians may have over Muhammad's dealings with

women, for example.³ Of course these reactions may come because Muslims actually want to revere Jesus as one of Allah's prophets.

A Christian who does not understand how his confession of faith can go against the grain with other people has not really understood the Gospel himself.

Without shame

Nonetheless, the Incarnation is especially dear to us all. Muslims must learn that they cannot say just anything in any way and certainly not while talking with Christians. It might be a good idea if not only Christians in Pakistan would take to the streets to protest against provocative cartoons from Scandinavia but if at the same time in Dutch cities, Muslims would clean their shops of substandard anti-Christian publications.

I am not writing to Muslims here but to committed Christians. As Christians, you must fearlessly and boldly keep 'rejoicing in Christ' – yes, in the crucified Christ. Make clear that He is truly everything to you. By so doing, an opportunity opens up. The secularised Dutch have become immune to it, but Muslims are capable of feeling how much it hurts when somebody makes depreciative comments about what is actually holy to you. Under God's blessing, may this prove to be an opening to release the power of the message of the weak incarnate Christ!

Footnotes

1 I do not mean only as a reaction to insults from others, but in general. Moreover, the example of Isaiah 44 tells how, in certain circumstances, we could speak about non-Christians. Again,

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- this is not as a result of what other people may say about us.
2. *Jyllands Posten* is the name of the magazine that published the cartoons. Abou Jahja published anti-Semitic cartoons in reaction to this.
3. I am thinking of all his wives, including the girl Aicha and Zainab, who, in fact, was his daughter-in-law.