

PEN CANADA

for FREEDOM of EXPRESSION

The furore over recent Danish cartoons depicting Muhammed is deeply troubling for many people of good will who passionately support freedom of expression, who are appalled by terrorism, and who are sickened by the conflating of Islamic terrorists with Muslims generally. Thus, the publication of these cartoons has raised important questions about the limits that may be placed on freedom of expression.

The charter of International PEN—a leading human rights association of writers and other strong supporters of free speech—contains two clauses that are worth consideration in this situation. One calls upon PEN members to foster “good understanding and mutual respect among nations . . . to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds, and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in the world.” The other speaks to PEN’s support for “unhampered transmission of thought” and for a free press; it goes on say that “since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.”

Most of us in Canada will arrive at our own positions on the Danish cartoons without having seen them, since newspapers here (apart from *Le Devoir*, which printed one cartoon) have chosen not to publish the cartoons. One cartoon depicts Muhammed wearing a turban shaped as a bomb with a lit fuse; another shows Muhammed warning suicide bombers that paradise has run out of virgins. Defenders of the cartoons have argued that they satirically depict only that version of Islam constructed by terrorists to justify their actions. But this is an argument whose subtleties are easily missed, particularly in our present incendiary context.

That the cartoons would be profoundly offensive should have been understood, as the depiction of Muhammed in any form is regarded as blasphemy by **most** Muslims, and these are notably inflammatory depictions. Reasonable persons may disagree on whether a line was crossed in the Danish newspaper’s publication of the original cartoons, or in their republication in several other countries; on how heavily the likely consequences should have been weighed; and on whether “voluntary restraint” in this case would have represented capitulation or simple respect for others.

Political cartoons, both in the West and in the Islamic world, regularly employ broad caricatures and gross exaggeration. They offend individuals and groups with great frequency and, at the same time, make important contributions to political discourse. The normal give-and-take of editors and cartoonists seeks to negotiate this terrain, and sometimes results in calling a halt to the publication of

Honorary Patron

John Ralston Saul

President

Constance Rooke

Vice-President

Camilla Gibb

Treasurer

Hank Bulmash

Chair, Writers in Prison Committee

Alan Cumyn

Chair, National Affairs

Christopher Waddell

Chair, Legal Affairs

Bruce MacDougall

Chair, Writers in Exile Committee

Mary Jo Leddy

Chair, Communications Committee

Louise Denny

Chair, Fundraising Committee

Diane Davy

Editor, Newsletter & Annual Report

Alison Gordon

Board of Directors

Martha Butterfield

David Cronenberg

David Israelson

Rohinton Mistry

Anna Porter

Janet Somerville

Past President, ex-officio

Haroon Siddiqui

Executive Director

Isobel Harry

Administrator

Caitlin Smith

Coordinator, Readers & Writers

Philip Adams

Coordinator, Programs and

Writers in Exile Network

David Cozac

Past Presidents

Margaret Atwood

Reza Baraheni

Eugene Benson

Marian Botsford Fraser

June Callwood

Louise Denny

Timothy Findley

Graeme Gibson

Alison Gordon

Katherine Govier

Ron Graham

Ann Ireland

Sandra Martin

Nino Ricci

John Ralston Saul

Haroon Siddiqui

cartoons that are regarded as being in egregiously bad taste, gratuitously insulting, morally reprehensible, or in violation of limits established by law. On other occasions, considerations such as a belief in the merit of the cartoons in question or a desire to strike a blow for freedom of the press will carry the day.

Whatever the intentions of those responsible for the creation and publication of these cartoons may have been, it is clear that great damage has been done. Good people have been badly hurt. Belief that the West is increasingly prepared to countenance disrespect of Islam has been fuelled. It is intensely worrying to see that some of those who defend the cartoons most vociferously under the banner of free speech have engaged in divisive, broadly anti-Muslim rhetoric. And Islamic extremists wanting to accelerate a “clash of civilizations” have taken full advantage of the situation. Other, far more insulting cartoons have been circulated in order to fuel anti-Western sentiment. Death threats have been issued, and embassies have been torched.

PEN Canada deplores violence, and we are united in our strong defence both of the right to free speech *and* of the responsibilities associated with “voluntary restraint” in the interest of civil society. We are deeply alarmed at the escalation of tensions, and with International PEN call on all sides of the dispute to refrain from taking any action that might inflame tensions further. The situation urgently requires a space for debate on these critical issues in which all may express their views without fear of censorship, imprisonment, or even threat to life.

PEN Canada often defends speech with which many of us strongly disagree. If we did not, the principle of free speech would be meaningless. Healthy debate has been the way of our society, within the bounds of decency and the law. PEN Canada supports the right of a free press to publish these cartoons, but also believes that a wise consideration of the principle of “voluntary restraint” would have led to better decisions. Finally, we urge all Canadians as they enter into dialogue on this matter to support two great principles on which our democracy depends: the right to free speech, and respect for the dignity and beliefs of others. Both must be upheld.

Constance Rooke
President, PEN Canada

February 10, 2006