

## Cartoons and Apologist Bluster

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, February 23, 2006

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I'm a big fan of free speech. I indulge in it frequently.

I stand behind the rights of people to speak their minds without fear of state-sanctioned repression. I do, however, recognize the reality that I may not have as much freedom to yell "Fire!" in a crowded movie theatre as I do to say that I believe Prime Sinister Stephen Harper will do his best to incrementally defund the public health care system while enabling greater public funding of private clinics.

I'm also not so stupid as to think that I can mock and ridicule a religion without realistically expecting a backlash. I'm fully prepared to accept criticism and hate mail from Conservatives [sic, Reform/Alliance] Party members about my beliefs about their sinister leader. I am not, however, interested in sparking riots or even reasonable critical reaction among Muslims by posting the Islam-mocking cartoons on this blog.

Rights do not exist in a vacuum.

They exist with corresponding responsibilities. Yelling "Fire!" in a movie theatre has reasonable social repercussions, perhaps including criminal charges.

Mocking a religion, especially one with a radical fundamentalist strain [like Islam, Christianity or Judaism], is foolish if you think that no one will respond simply because you have the right of free speech.

How about Pat Robertson? No one realistically called for the suspension of his broadcasting license because of his ramblings about the value of the US government assassinating one of my favorite anti-neoliberals, Hugo Chavez. The idea likely isn't even unique to Robertson. There are valid political arguments for that murder. Sure, there would be consequences, but that's to be expected. In fact, the fact that the Americans haven't tried to kidnap or murder him since their failed April 2002 kidnapping [wow, there's that free speech again], means they likely realize the hit wouldn't go down so well.

The US government even had to spin Robertson's statements to show elements in the hemisphere that they don't allow him to define US foreign policy. Thank god, eh!

So there's Pat Robertson exercising his free speech without paying due attention to the commensurate responsibility of accepting or considering the consequences. Who knows, maybe he did have a full grasp of the consequences. I wouldn't want to speculate on the nature of his mind.

And how about another example of free speech with consequences: Suneera Thobani. Soon after 9/11 she delivered a speech that made her quite unpopular in some circles. [In her view](#),

*"My recent speech at a women's conference on violence against women has generated much controversy.*

*In the aftermath of the terrible attacks of September 11, I argued that the U.S. response of launching 'America's new war' would increase violence against women. I situated the current crisis within the continuity of North/South relations, rooted in colonialism and imperialism. I criticized American foreign policy, as well as President Bush's racialized construction of the American Nation. Finally, I spoke of the need for solidarity with Afghan women's organizations as well as the urgent necessity for the women's movement in Canada to oppose the war."*

Decontextualized and distorted media reports of my address have led to accusations of me being an academic impostor, morally bankrupt and engaging in hate-mongering. It has been fascinating to observe how my comments regarding American foreign policy, a record well documented by numerous sources whose accuracy or credentials cannot be faulted, have been dubbed 'hate-speech.' To speak about the indisputable record of U.S. backed coups, death squads, bombings and killings ironically makes me a 'hate-monger.' I was even made the subject of a 'hate-crime' complaint to the RCMP, alleging that my speech was a 'hate-crime.'"

So in light of all that above, here is what I feel about [this piece from Spiegel Online](#) that I received almost 3 weeks ago and only now have the mental reserve to properly address without throwing my laptop across the room.

*"If the west does not stand in solidarity with the Danish, he argues, then the Islamization of Europe will have begun in earnest."*

This kind of black and white thinking sounds very w.Caesar-ish: you're either with us or you're with the terrorists. I wonder if "Warrag" wrote the sub-headline.

I welcome extreme free speech in a certain context ideally. In an educated society when people are willing to voluntarily debate contentious issues, extreme and radical free speech is worthy of debate. Given this, it would still be unreasonable and irresponsible to not expect some people to legitimately be offended by such speech and even react to it. Society is made up of all sorts of people.

*"Are we in the west going to cave into pressure from societies with a medieval mindset?"*

I suspect "Warrag," a Muslim, is referring to the fundamentalist elements that are radically objecting to the cartoons. Calling them medieval is interesting. I wonder if he would make the same judgement of the fundamentalist Christian and neo-conservative elements in the United States and elsewhere, and radical Judaism.

*"A democracy cannot survive long without freedom of expression, the freedom to argue, to dissent, even to insult and offend. It is a freedom sorely lacking in the Islamic world, and without it Islam will remain unassailed in its dogmatic, fanatical, medieval fortress; ossified, totalitarian and intolerant. Without this fundamental freedom, Islam will continue to stifle thought, human rights, individuality; originality and truth."*

This is so odd. I would say virtually the same thing about the dissent-is-unpatriotic mantra spilling forth from the radicalizing United States: dogmatic, fanatical, ossified, totalitarian, intolerant, stifled thought, individuality, originality and truth. TRUTH, even. Saddam Hussein has what...WMDs?

At the same time, the freedom to insult and offend is only consequence-free if you are of the opinion that free speech means no one can object or react to what you say. Ask Pat Robertson about that issue. Sunera Thobani already knows that truth.

I'm not sure I can stand by with "*unashamed...solidarity*" with the Danish and say to the world that no one has the right to react or be offended because I and others have free speech. That is just irresponsible. "*Do not apologize*" is needlessly inflammatory.

"Warraq" ends:

*"Freedom of expression is our western heritage and we must defend it or it will die from totalitarian attacks. It is also much needed in the Islamic world. By defending our values, we are teaching the Islamic world a valuable lesson, we are helping them by submitting their cherished traditions to Enlightenment values."*

The West as saviour. An unapologetic stance when the West does wrong; despite empire and oppression, we bring good things to light. And from this, the condescending attitude that we can teach the rest of the world a lesson. While the West has lessons others can learn, we should be re-learning them too. As long as radical tyranny and disregard for the consequences of free speech remain, the West is no real role model.