



ILRS STATEMENT ON THE CARTOON INCIDENTS

The International League of Religious Socialists expresses its great concern over the recent incidents resulting from the publication of editorial cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

The right of individuals to speak freely about what they believe is an essential element of a modern democratic society, a right that must be defended. At the same time, it is also a matter of basic social responsibility that one should seek to avoid a method of expression that is deliberately offensive to the identity, religion, or culture of others.

For religious socialists, whose own identity has at important times in history been based upon our willingness to say or publish things that some governments and religious authorities have found to be offensive, this particular incident is complex.

It is not possible for socialists to support a social order where ideas, even the most sacred ideas held by any religion, cannot be openly debated. Instead we put our trust in the fact that the overwhelming majority of people in the world are not using their words or actions to offend or attack the sacred ideas of others, and then work to create a space for genuine dialogue between faiths and cultures in the interest of furthering global democracy and respect among peoples.

The question of consequences for those few in society who deliberately seek to offend is a valid but separate one; there are laws in democratic countries which do prosecute a clear intent to do harm to the beliefs or identity of others. But that intent is not so easy to determine when we look at the present situation.

The Danish newspaper responsible for printing the cartoons has apologised for doing so; this shows an understanding that an offence was caused by their publication, and we welcome the apology as a necessary step towards healing the wound.

However, the nature of, and motivation for the worldwide protests we have witnessed have now become a matter for investigation, as it has been revealed that while the original publication of the cartoons in September of 2005 may have been an inciteful act by one European newspaper, not much public attention was given to the matter until those same cartoons, along with others much worse that were never printed anywhere, were actually created and distributed by Muslim clerics in Islamic nations in order to provoke the unrest we have seen in those nations.

Therefore, it is not so easy to find only one source of the problem, nor to assign only one source of blame for the publication of offensive cartoons. This only demonstrates further the ongoing need for developing contact, dialogue and understanding among people in our global village.

The violent reaction to those cartoons in some nations has raised the issue throughout the world of the ability of individuals to speak their minds without fear of injury or oppression. In the kind of society we seek to build, such violence against thought, even questionable thought, is totally unacceptable, and we condemn it unconditionally.

At this moment the most important question before us is what we all shall do to move beyond this situation. The way to avoid the 'clash of civilisations' is by building an alliance between people of different faiths and cultures who are willing to defend the freedom of thought and expression across the borders of those civilisations, and who can agree at the same time to work for a world where mutual respect and social justice replace provocation and poverty.

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