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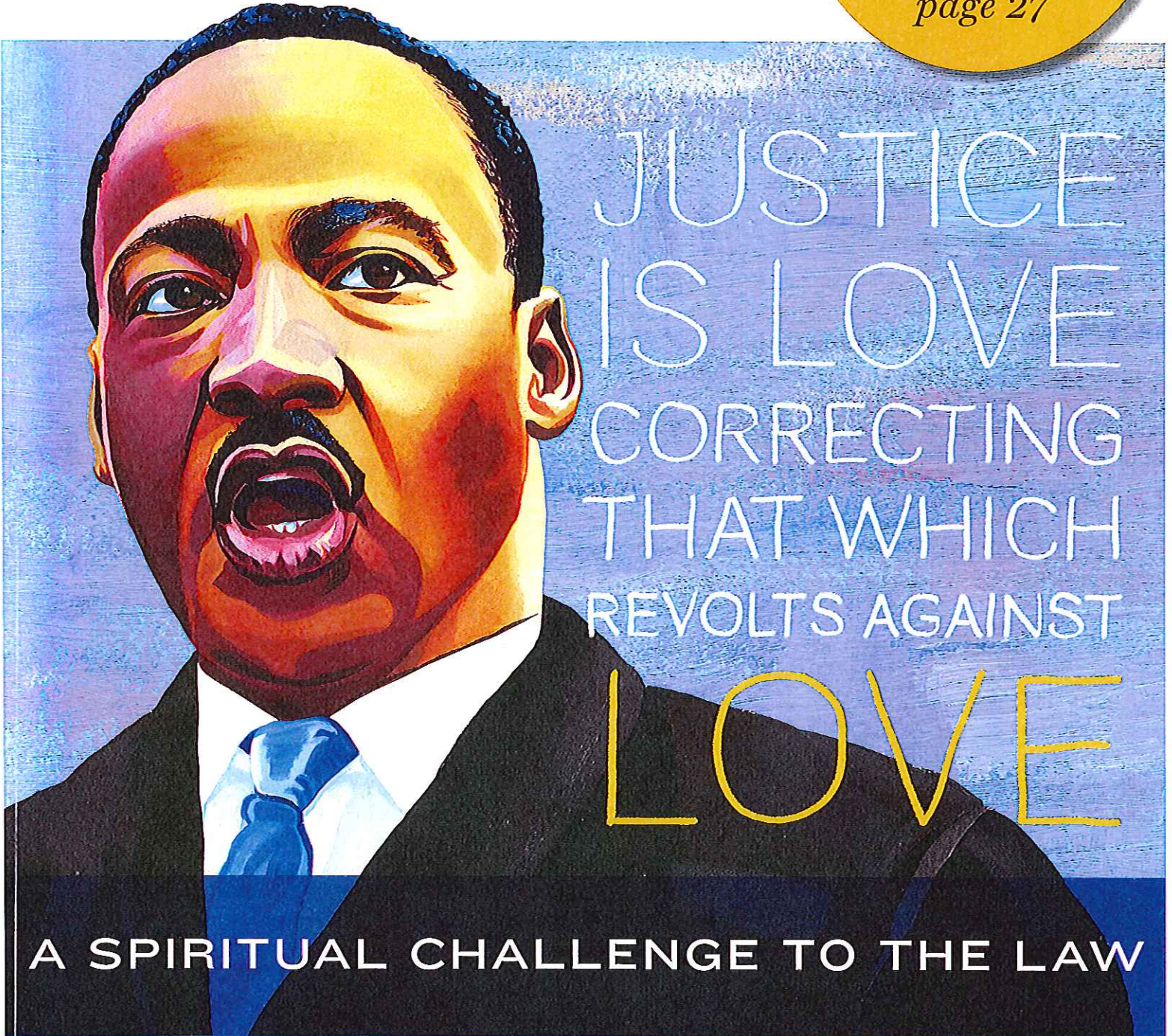
POLITICS + SPIRITUALITY + CULTURE

(tē·kūn) To heal, repair, and transform the world.

SUMMER 2015

**NONVIOLENCE
IN FOREIGN
POLICY**

page 27



A SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE TO THE LAW



Vandana Shiva on Protecting Biodiversity | Lessons from the Shadow Side of Football
A Scientific View of God | A Psychoanalytic Approach to Trauma in Israel/Palestine
Net Neutrality and the Fight for Social Justice | Love for the Prophet Muhammad

\$5.95 U.S.

3 Letters

**The Genesis
of Gender**
page 39

EDITORIALS

5 Repenting for What Israel Did to Gaza — Without Condoning the Wrongs Committed by Hamas

The human suffering is monumental. The political consequence was a major rightward turn in Israel that shaped the 2015 Israeli elections.

8 A Spiritual Practice of Forgiveness and Repentance

You don't have to be Jewish to benefit from the spiritual wisdom of Jewish High Holidays!

10 War with Iran: The Disastrous Aim of Israel and the Republicans

But it's actually the last thing the United States or Israel needs.

POLITICS & SOCIETY

13 Net Neutrality and the Fight for Social Justice | SAM ROSS-BROWN

Net neutrality is not just for techies. The digital roots of the Black Lives Matter movement show why we must fight to keep the internet open to all.

15 Acknowledging the Other's Suffering: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Trauma in Israel/Palestine | JESSICA BENJAMIN

Even in situations of extreme trauma and asymmetrical power, it's possible to move beyond an us/them mentality. Here's how.

17 The Spiritual Dimension of Social Justice: Transforming the Legal Arena | PETER GABEL

We need a new legal paradigm that affirms the spiritual dimension of our common existence. Join our efforts to place empathy at the center of the law.

24 Rethinking Agriculture: Protecting Biodiversity Amid Climate Chaos | VANDANA SHIVA

Biodiverse systems are more resilient to climate change. As the oceans rise, we must hasten to stop the spread of monocultures and protect biodiversity.

SPECIAL SECTION: NONVIOLENCE IN FOREIGN POLICY

PAGE 27

28 Nonviolence Writ Large | MICHAEL N. NAGLER

Nonviolence could be the way of nations — and that might just save us.

29 Alternatives to War from the Bottom Up | STEPHEN ZUNES

Simply opposing war is not enough — we need to put forward credible alternatives. Nonviolent statecraft is within our reach.

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Visit tikkun.org/nonviolence to read additional articles by Marc Gopin and others on "Nonviolence in Foreign Policy."

31 Revolutionary Nonviolence:

Statecraft Lessons from the Global South | MATT MEYER

Nonviolent activists in the Global North have much to learn from their counterparts in Zambia, Ghana, Tanzania, India, and Grenada.

34 Strengthening Local Economies: The Path to Peace?

HELENA NORBERG-HODGE

To understand the rise in terrorism worldwide, we must examine the impact of global consumer culture on communities across the planet.

RETHINKING RELIGION

39 The Genesis of Gender | JOY LADIN

A closer look at the Book of Genesis reveals how deeply the gender binary is ingrained in our culture. What would it mean to smash this binary?

44 Lessons from the Shadow Side of Football:

Building the Religious Counterculture | ANA LEVY-LYONS

To uproot our most entrenched institutions, we need a countercultural vision. The story of professional football illustrates why.

46 Love for the Prophet Muhammad: A Key to Countering Islamism and Islamophobia | JOSEPH LUMBARD

Neither Islamophobic westerners nor militant Islamists are right about the Prophet Muhammad — he believed in nonviolence, not retaliation.

CULTURE

BOOKS

49 A Scientific View of God

A God That Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science, and the Future of Our Planet
by Nancy Abrams | Review by Rami Shapiro

51 What Can Replace Prison?

Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison
by Nell Bernstein

Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better
by Maya Schenwar | Review by Al Hunter

54 Jacob Chose Hospice: A Critique of Invasive End-of-Life Care

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End by Atul Gawande
Review by Martha Sonnenberg

56 The Poetry of a Jewish Humanist

Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems 1980-2015 by Chana Bloch
Review by Philip Terman

POETRY

58 Babel | by Chana Bloch

72 Do You See Me | by Else Lasker-Schüler, translated by Jay Hopler

Love for the Prophet Muhammad

A Key to Countering Islamism and Islamophobia

BY JOSEPH LUMBARD

NON-MUSLIMS OFTEN struggle to understand Muslims because they fail to grasp the role that the Prophet Muhammad plays in our lives. Failing to realize the breadth of the Prophet's teachings and the depth of love for the Prophet throughout the Islamic world, many non-Muslims are quick to believe ISIS, the Wahhabis, and other militant groups when they claim that it is they who adhere to the precepts set by the Prophet Muhammad and are thus the true followers of the "prophetic model."

Yet the understanding of the prophetic model among militant Islamist groups falls far short of what is conveyed by the classical Islamic tradition. Far from being the literalists that some portray them to be, militant Islamists choose to ignore or explain away those teachings that expose their wanton violence for what it is. When non-Muslims fail to recognize this, they succumb to severe miscalculations regarding both ISIS and the nature of Islam. It is thus of the utmost importance to consider what the prophetic model means to the majority of Muslims.

Several years ago, the song that topped the charts in Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Arab world was Sami Yusuf's "Muallim" (Teacher), a song in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. A few years later, Mesut Kurtis topped the charts with "The Burdah" (The Mantle), whose refrain is "Our Lord, bless and have peace, at all times and forever, upon the beloved who is the best of all creation." The title and refrain of the latter come from the most widely read poem in the history of Islam, "The Mantle" (al-Burdah), written in thirteenth-century Egypt, and recited to this day by Muslims from Indonesia to Europe, from Senegal to South Africa to the United States and almost everywhere in between.

The Prophet As a Source of Love and Hope

The enduring love of the Prophet Muhammad exhibited in this and thousands of other poems is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Islam. As the German scholar Annemarie Schimmel observes, even Western accounts that display tremendous respect for the Prophet Muhammad "betray nothing of the mystical love that his followers feel for him." This love endures throughout popular culture among the young and old alike, as evoked in this oft-recited passage of "The Mantle":

Incomparable, his beauty has no peer —
The essence of beauty itself is inseparable from him.

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Salma

Covenant from the Prophets
by Salma Arastu.

Ascribe to his essence what you wish of honor,
Attribute to his exalted status what you will of greatness!

Truly, the Messenger of God's bounty
Cannot be overstated by two lips and a tongue.

If a miracle could equal his magnitude,
The mere mention of his name would revive decaying bones.

For the majority of Muslims it is this inner spiritual reality that defines the Prophet Muhammad. We understand all of his actions in light of his direct connection to God. But for many non-Muslims, as well as for Muslims entrenched in militant political manifestations of Islamism, it is as if the Prophet's spiritual nature is veiled by his human nature; his role as a spiritual model and guide is obscured by his role as a statesman and military leader. This misunderstanding is perpetuated in the West by much of the misinformation and disinformation regarding the Prophet that has become ingrained in Western culture for over 1,000 years. As the *Cambridge History of Islam* observes,

Occidental readers are still not completely free from the prejudices inherited from their medieval ancestors. In the bitterness of the Crusades and other wars against the Saracens, they came to regard the Muslims, and in particular Muhammad, as the incarnation of all that was evil, and the continuing effect of the propaganda of that period has not yet been completely removed from occidental thinking about Islam.

Given this background and a view of the Prophet that is at best "all too human," from a classical Islamic perspective, the vast majority of Westerners are unable to understand that a caricature of the Prophet is, for many Muslims, the greatest of insults. This is especially so for those Muslims who feel dispossessed by the forces of globalization, and

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hold fast to God and his Prophet as their lifeboat in a sea of troubles. For as "The Mantle" says, "The Prophet is the beloved whose intercession is hoped for."

Even many non-practicing Muslims find in the Prophet Muhammad the greatest source of love, hope, and inspiration. As the Qur'an says, "The Prophet is closer to the believers than they are to themselves" (33:6). The Qur'an advises, "You have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example" (33:21), and verse 68:4, addressing the Prophet, states, "truly thou art of an exalted character." When asked about the Prophet's character, his wife Aisha says, "The character of God's Prophet was the Qur'an."

Based upon these and other sayings, the Prophet Muhammad is seen as the living embodiment of the message he delivered. The well-preserved record of his actions, sayings, and even tacit approvals thus provides Muslims a model for how they, like him, can conduct themselves with submission and mindfulness at every turn. To follow the Prophet's example is to live a life wherein all the diverse elements of one's being rotate around the truth, unified in perpetual submission to God. This prophetic model coordinates the chaos of worldly existence by returning it to its divine center, transforming the diffuse cacophony of daily life into the harmony of a life lived by the eternal rhythm of heaven.

Countering Extremist Interpretations of the Qur'an

Today, some see the actions of strident puritanical Islamists as indicative of a warrior religion that will stop at nothing to suppress all others. Such militarist interpretations, however, take particular incidents and sayings out of their broader context and employ them to justify political and apocalyptic aspirations. It cannot be denied that military campaigns occurred in the life of the Prophet and that the Prophet and his followers took both the defensive and the offensive in these campaigns. But nothing could be further from the practice of the Prophet Muhammad than political and military processes in which the ends are used to justify the means.

For the first thirteen years of his prophetic mission (610-622), the Prophet and his followers suffered persecution, yet he sought the way of nonviolence. In 622 he was driven from his home in Mecca. He and his followers were forced to employ military tactics to ensure their survival. Even then, the Prophet sought to avoid conflict when possible, preferring just treaties to armed conflict, as stipulated in verse 8:61 of the Qur'an: "If they incline unto peace, then incline unto it." In this vein, the Prophet instructed his followers, "Do not desire to meet the enemy." Fewer than 1,000 people died in the battles by which he came to rule Arabia, and when he rode into Mecca at the head of a victorious army in the year 629, he ordered that no blood be shed, for his mission was to ennoble, not to abase.

When asked of the Prophet's conduct, Anas ibn Malik, who had been his servant for much of his prophetic mission, declared, "He never struck a man, woman, or child." He was known to many as the most trustworthy, generous, and gentle of God's creation. In a statement that still echoes throughout the Islamic world, the Prophet said, "The merciful are those upon whom God has mercy. Have mercy upon those on earth, He Who is in Heaven will be merciful unto you" and "There is no harming or requiting harm." When the Prophet received insults from his enemies, he was enjoined to turn away from those who mocked him and to instead turn toward God: "Certainly We know that thy breast is constricted because of what they say. So hymn the praise of thy Lord, be among those who prostrate, and worship thy Lord, until certainty comes unto thee" (Qur'an 15:97-99).

Qur'anic passages such as this teach that in the face of mockery and ridicule, one should not respond with pettiness, anger, or violence, but instead seek solace in God. When confronted with the pettiness of others, Muslims are enjoined, "Remember God and leave them to their idle chatter" (Qur'an 6:91). It is a general principle of Islamic ethics that one not respond in kind to insults, be they intentional or unintentional; rather one should have patience and trust in God. (continued on page 70)

Omalu, and make the whole thing just go away. Omalu experienced firsthand Jung's insight that we humans resist seeing our own shadows. It's too terrifying, too painful, and too disconcerting at the deepest level of our being because the shadow is part of us.

In the collective unconscious of football fans, it was unthinkable that this beloved game could be destroying its heroes. And then, in the face of the indisputable evidence, the players began hiding their own concussions from the public. As recently as a few years ago, over half of NFL players said they would try to hide a concussion rather than take themselves out of a game. They explain that if you don't want to get hit, you shouldn't be playing football. They hid their concussions, even while acknowledging that they would suffer from them later in life—acknowledging that they will have trouble walking and speaking, perhaps becoming, so to speak, a shadow of their former selves. One player who was interviewed about why he would not report a concussion said, "I'm not going to tell on myself." This phrase echoes Jung's description of a man "standing in his own light." It speaks of a person at war with him or herself: a divided being that can't turn and face its own shadow. And the shadow overwhelms it.

"Shadow" is an apt metaphor because of course shadows are shaped like the objects that cast them. They're not spontaneous and separate. They are intimately related to those objects. In human terms, our shadows often correspond to unique gifts and strengths that we have. They are the opposite sides of a coin that makes us who we

are. You can't discard just one side of a coin. And our ego—the part of ourselves that we like, that we see, and that we do claim as "us"—holds on desperately to itself at all costs.

The raw aggression of 300-pound men repeatedly slamming each other to the ground is not just incidental to the game. It's not something that can be neatly and politely removed with the coroner's scalpel because someone might get a headache. It is central to the game. It is, at least in part, what the game is about. The game is a celebration of male strength and power. So it's not surprising that its inverse, its shadow, is a condition that creates ultimate weakness, dependency, and internal collapse. And it's also not surprising that this shadow—the fact that these heroes would be rendered so vulnerable by the very thing that made them so powerful—would be virtually impossible to see. To anyone invested in the culture of football, which was most of the country, the implications of letting it sink in were literally unthinkable.

What It Takes To See Our Shadows

It took someone who did not care about football to be able to see its shadow. It took someone who was born in another country. It took someone who knew nothing about the game, to whom the players looked like extraterrestrials, to whom the whole thing was literally *alien*. It took someone with no investment in the institution to see it for what it was. The people who became Omalu's foes recognized immediately that his "otherness" posed an existential threat to football as we know it. They were

vicious in their defense. In an interview, Omalu said, "Yes, some of them actually said that I'm attacking the American way of life. 'How dare you, a foreigner like you from Nigeria? What is Nigeria known for, the eighth most corrupt country in the world? Who are you? Who do you think you are to come to tell us how to live our lives?'"

The fact is that Bennet Omalu *was* a threat to the American way of life and to the multibillion-dollar industry of football. And through this threat, he was a blessing for humanity. When he asked, "Who's Mike Webster?" he modeled the benefits of standing a little apart from even our most beloved institutions. He modeled the genius available to us when we look at the world afresh, through a spiritual lens, with no preconceptions of what we might find.

In these days of powerful, entrenched institutions, of global capital and political gridlock, we would be wise to intentionally cultivate a perspective like Omalu's. Individually and through our religious communities let's reserve some corner of our being that is not invested *at all* in advancing our social accomplishments, making money, or preserving who we think we are as a culture. We need to develop a countercultural corner of our being that is not mired in what *is*, but free, even by a hair's breadth, to imagine what could be. This is the spiritual self and this is the religious self: the self who can see our world even from a little distance, as if we were extraterrestrials. This is the self who can lovingly coax us out of our holes, allow us to see our shadows and not be afraid, and herald the coming of the warmth and light of spring. ■

LUMBARD (continued from page 48)

When a group of the Prophet's opponents addressed him by saying, "Death be upon you" (*al-sām* "alaykum), a play on the Muslim greeting "Peace be upon you" (*al-salām* "alaykum), the Prophet

cautioned his wife against verbal retaliation, saying, "Go easy, O Aishah! You must be kind." Such counsel is in accord with a well-known maxim articulated in many sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that one should never act out of anger. The wisdom behind such

counsel can be seen in the effects of responses to the satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in the Danish periodical *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. While the vast majority of Muslims voiced their opposition to the caricatures in a peaceful manner, the

violent responses of Islamists in Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, among other countries, ensured that such caricatures would spread far and wide and inspired the creation of dozens if not hundreds of other caricatures of the Prophet. Similarly, the murder of eleven employees at the offices of the French weekly satirical *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 has not brought the honor that was sought. Rather it has undermined the understanding of Islam and compromised the safety of Muslims in Europe and beyond. In both instances, violent retaliation has done far more to besmirch the name of Muhammad than to honor it.

The Politics of Satire

The atrocities committed by Islamists in response to the caricatures in *Charlie Hebdo* and to the Danish cartoon affair were a direct violation of Islamic teachings. It nonetheless behooves us to examine why some Muslims' reactions to caricatures of Prophet Muhammad have become so strident, not in an effort to excuse such responses, but to see them from all perspectives. What is the context wherein emotions could be so readily inflamed by a few cartoons? This was not simply about depicting the Prophet, as some have portrayed it to be. The permissibility of producing images of the Prophet has always been debated in Islam. Nonetheless, there are thousands of classical Islamic miniatures in which he is depicted, though always in the context of veneration, not caricature. The issue that gave rise to so much consternation among Muslims of all walks is the needless desecration of sacred symbols through misrepresentation and vilification of the Prophet Muhammad.

Satire is not an innocent game. It can in fact be quite cruel, especially when some claim the right to trample with impunity upon that which is closest to the hearts of others. All societies and individuals have lines they believe should not be crossed: words, deeds, and subjects that are considered

taboo. For Muslims, even many secular non-practicing Muslims, insulting the Prophet Muhammad (or any prophet for that matter) is such a subject. In the West, it is generally agreed that although free speech might permit us to insult or even denigrate another, basic human decency does not allow us to do so. It is not illegal for anyone to insult my parents, but it is also not socially acceptable. Propriety and courtesy are part of an unwritten social contract woven from delicate abstinences that reflect respect for all human beings. Most recognize that freedom of speech is not an absolute inalienable right—that as with any freedom, it comes with responsibilities. It is by meeting those responsibilities that we maintain the privilege to have that freedom. This is why we have laws against hate speech in over two dozen Western countries.

Modern Incarnations of the Medieval Polemic Against Islam

In this context, many Muslims feel that the Charlie Hebdo caricatures and the Danish cartoon affair are emblematic of the West's inability to apply equitable standards of hate speech to itself. The caricatures of the Prophet appear as a continuation of the medieval polemic against Islam, a polemic whose weapon of choice was often the vilification of the Prophet and the Qur'an. As Minou Reeves has shown in *Muhammad In Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth Making*, from the medieval period through the Enlightenment and beyond, there has been no shortage of pens ready to dishonor, denigrate, and (from the Muslim perspective) blaspheme the Prophet Muhammad.

Faced with such patronizing claims as "if we mock you, that shows that you are part of our culture," and "everyone must be willing to put up with sarcasm, mockery, and ridicule," along with disingenuous lectures about the nature of free speech, obfuscations regarding

the intent behind the caricatures, and claims that any Muslims who are offended are backward, totalitarian, and medieval, many Muslims cannot see the continuing caricatures of the Prophet as anything other than another chapter in the long and sordid history of Western anti-Islamic polemics.

The outward attacks against the Prophet Muhammad, such as the epithets of Dante, the fulminations of Luther and other men of the Church, the vituperations of Marlowe, mockery at the hands of Rabelais, and the vitriol of Voltaire, are easier to accept. Such polemic is straightforward and honest. But the pen of the satirist is far more insidious, especially when used to ridicule and even provoke fractured and dispossessed minorities, which Muslims constitute in France, Denmark, and much of Europe. In this respect, many would agree that some of the caricatures represent a puerile and irresponsible use of free speech. Just as the atrocities committed by a few Islamists did more to besmirch the name of the Prophet and of Islam, so too did the publication of the caricatures do more to harm the moral foundations of free speech than to uphold them.

Until we seek to understand one another through real dialogue, and learn to respect each other's sanctities and sensibilities, we will remain complicit in continuing the cycle of senseless and reciprocal hate. In the current environment, such efforts are of the utmost importance. Those of us who seek to adhere to the fullness of the prophetic model provide the bulwark against those who cherry-pick prophetic statements to support narrow objectives. Recognition of what following the "unlettered Prophet" (Qur'an 7:157), the "luminous lamp" (33:46), and the "bearer of glad tidings" (17:105; 25:56; 33:45) has meant to Muslims throughout history can thus serve as the means whereby the Prophet Muhammad does indeed remain a beautiful example whose legacy is "a mercy unto the worlds" (21:107). ■