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On Point: Speak no evil . . .



February 14, 2006

Vincent Carroll
[email](#) | [bio](#)

Even rank bigots and ignoramuses are capable of raising an arresting point every now and then.

Iranian officials have been getting a lot of ink, for example, for noting that some of the same

European countries defending the right of newspapers to print the Muhammad cartoons meanwhile ban speech denying the Holocaust.

So are these countries hypocritical? To a point, obviously. But what the Iranians don't acknowledge because it doesn't suit their anti-Semitic thesis is that restrictions on free speech in Europe go well beyond the Holocaust. And in recent years, some of the major beneficiaries of these restrictions have been protesting Muslims.

The actress Brigitte Bardot, for example, was fined two years ago for writing a book that, in the French court's words, "presents Muslims as barbaric and cruel invaders, responsible for terrorist acts and eager to dominate the French to the extent of wanting to exterminate them."

The author Oriana Fallaci awaits trial in Italy over similar charges - that she slandered Muslims in her book *The Strength of Reason*.

And in Britain, the government intends to prosecute for a second time the leader of the right-wing British National Party for calling Islam a "vicious, wicked faith."

With "hate speech" already banned, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government nearly succeeded just weeks ago in passing a law outlawing any speech that merely *ridiculed* religion. The measure - conceived with the sensitivities of Muslims in mind - lost by one vote.

The Iranian leadership will be pleased to learn that had that law passed - and no doubt it will be revived someday - publishing

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the Muhammad cartoons would not even have been an option. And this in Britain, no less, where political caricature has flourished for hundreds of years.

. . . especially at a university

This country has so far balked at mimicking Europeans in outlawing certain kinds of offensive speech. Indeed, the only institutions here that seem eager to import the cramped European attitude are our universities, which regularly adopt speech codes that treat the First Amendment as if it didn't exist.

Here's a current example from Jacksonville State University in Alabama (thanks to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education for the tip): Under "personal abuse," the university policy reads, "No student shall threaten, offend, or degrade anyone on University owned or operated property."

No student shall offend *anyone*? Shouldn't students at least enjoy immunity while ordering lunch in case their request for a cheeseburger offends a passing vegan?

Muhammad matters

For a clear-headed rebuke of the rationale behind speech codes, we need travel only as far as Colorado State University in Fort Collins. "My job is not to bring people together," professor James Lindsay told the *Rocky Mountain Collegian* last week. "My job is to teach history. History is not pleasant in many cases, and I made it very clear in class that this is America and you all have the right to offend but you do not have the right to not be offended."

Lindsay was explaining to the college paper why he chose to present slides of the Danish cartoons as well as much older representations of Muhammad in his survey course of Islamic history. He usually steers clear of contemporary events, he told me Monday, but since the class had just completed several weeks studying the life of Muhammad, he thought his slides would underscore what he'd been telling them all along: "The biography of Muhammad matters - right down to the present day."

Lindsay understands the feelings of a Saudi student who tearfully protested the professor's presentation, but is confident most other students - it's a big class - will confirm that he treated the subject respectfully and with educational purpose.

By the way, professor, what about the endlessly repeated claim that Islam prohibits any representation of Muhammad?

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"Absolute baloney," he said. "There is no legal prohibition, no Quranic prohibition."

The fellow who wrote *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World* surely ought to know.

Vincent Carroll, editor of the editorial pages, writes *On Point* several times a week. Reach him at carrollv@RockyMountainNews.com.

About Vincent Carroll

Vincent Carroll, editor of the editorial pages, is a longtime resident of Denver whose work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Barron's*. He has also been a syndicated columnist for the Newspaper Enterprise Association.

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