

Will we offend you? Yes, for the right reasons

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(Photo: Milt Priggee)

You are unlikely to see caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad on the Opinion pages of the Statesman Journal, even though you may see political cartoons depicting God, Jesus or other religious figures.

You are unlikely to see a cartoon portraying a Roman Catholic priest having sex with a child, even though cartoonists have drawn such images.

It's also doubtful that you would see a cartoon of police officers sitting around eating donuts, an outdated stereotype employed by some cartoonists.

Those cartoon choices are not censorship. They are editing.

In the aftermath of last week's horrific terrorist attack at the Paris offices of the cartoon-oriented satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, it's important to emphasize that difference.

Go for edgy, but know where line is

I love political cartoons, to the point that I sometimes spend my evenings at home collecting cartoons and posting galleries of them online for readers to enjoy. But there is a line of discretion somewhere, and it is my responsibility as editorial page editor to approach but not cross that line in selecting cartoons for publication.

Good political, or editorial, cartoons may offend someone. That is a given. Almost every week I hear from a Statesman Journal reader who takes issue with a cartoon. I appreciate those calls and emails. (The customer is not always right, but the customer is always the customer.)

But in the Mid-Valley, at least, there is nothing to be gained by needlessly offending — that is, offending merely for the sake of offense, rather than making a deft point.

European editorial cartoons tend to be more provocative — and less humorous — than American ones. European cartoons might be more like 19th-century American cartoons, which sometimes ran on newspapers' front pages and savaged political opponents with beastly caricatures.

Remember that newspapers in much of the world remain allied with specific political parties or ideologies, whereas most U.S. newspapers during the past century have moved toward avowed neutrality, often described as "objectivity," in their news coverage.

Whether we achieve that neutrality — that fairness, that balance — is for you, the reader, to decide.

Yes, opinion is ... opinionated

On the Opinion pages, however, almost everything is fair game. It is opinion, after all. However, I say "almost," because, for example, you'll rarely see an editorial cartoon about abortion in the Statesman Journal. The issue is too divisive, with too many people believing their view is sacrosanct, for a political cartoon to be effective.

My philosophy is that Opinion pages should provoke thought, debate and reaction. Each day, each reader should find something that he agrees with and something that makes her blood boil. If a commentary on the page has a liberal bent, I'll look for a conservative-oriented political cartoon. And vice versa, in order to provide a diversity of views.

A good political cartoon is edgy. It elicits a reaction: maybe laughter, maybe outrage. A good cartoonist uses exaggeration, caricature and minimal words to make a point — but without simply repeating stereotypes.

In the spirit of exaggeration, President Barack Obama often is drawn with big ears. (Even he says his family makes fun of his ears.) House Speaker John Boehner is caricatured as overly tanned and holding a cigarette. Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber's mustache is emphasized.

However, I discard cartoons that portray Obama with thick lips, a stereotypical depiction of African Americans. To me that image is racist, especially because Obama has thin lips.

I'm also troubled by how many cartoonists portray Islamic terrorists as people with huge noses and wild hair, as if that were how to spot a terrorist. Such depictions take me back to the Allies' ugly propaganda during World War I, when the "Huns" — a derogatory term for German soldiers — were portrayed with menacing eyes and savage hands, even drawn as apes.

Image ban lacks historical rationale

Regarding images of Mohammad, University of Michigan professor [Christiane Gruber](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/histart/people/faculty/ci.gruberchristiane_ci.detail) (http://www.lsa.umich.edu/histart/people/faculty/ci.gruberchristiane_ci.detail) wrote an [insightful essay for Newsweek](http://bit.ly/14EMZD5) (<http://bit.ly/14EMZD5>) last week. She begins:

"In the wake of the massacre that took place in the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo, I have been called upon as a scholar specializing in Islamic paintings of the Prophet to explain whether images of Muhammad are banned in Islam.

"The short and simple answer is no. The Koran does not prohibit figural imagery. Rather, it castigates the worship of idols"

She goes on to say, "a search for a ban on images of Muhammad in pre-modern Islamic textual sources will yield no clear and firm results whatsoever."

I encourage you to read the full article, which is online: bit.ly/14EMZD5 (<http://bit.ly/14EMZD5>).

Still, many Muslims interpret their religion as prohibiting such images. I see no good reason for the Statesman Journal to publish cartoons whose primary premise seems to be to offend.

That principle applies regardless of the subject matter.

Do we succeed in following that principle? Let me know.

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