



Jobs
Cars
Real Estate
Mortgages
Apartments
Classified
Sales/Deals
Place an Ad
Coupons

News**Business****Life**

Books
Crossword
Food
Garden
Home
Horoscope
Lottery
Style
Travel

Sports**Opinion****Obituaries****ctnow.com****Site Tools**

Yellow Pages
Maps
Traffic
Weather
Site Map
RSS Feeds

Services

[Subscribe](#)
[Archives](#)
[Reprints](#)
[Browse Ads](#)
[View Page 1](#)

[courant.com](#) [the web](#)



[Log in](#) [Register](#)

LIFESTYLE**Blasphemy**

February 9, 2006

By KATHLEEN MEGAN, Courant Staff Writer

For most of the West, it seems beyond ludicrous to imagine that people are being killed in Europe and the Middle East over a cartoon perceived as blasphemous.

In America, the concept of blasphemy as a legally punishable offense was mothballed a few centuries ago with the passing of Cotton Mather and a few other hot-tongued Puritans.

Lately, however, the provocative potential of acts that some consider blasphemous has become only too clear as outraged Muslims protest violently against the publication in Denmark of cartoons that lampooned the prophet Muhammad.

And even here in the U.S., the term blasphemy is being thrown about to describe the recent cover of Rolling Stone - which features Kanye West garbed as Jesus Christ, complete with crown of thorns - and the fledgling "Book of Daniel" television series, featuring a Jesus Christ character and a pill-popping Episcopalian priest, which was canceled after just three episodes. The B-word also has been raised in reference to "The Da Vinci Code," the best-selling novel due out in movie form this spring, which has offended the sensibilities of some Catholics.

What is blasphemy, exactly? And why does it ignite such deep feelings? And is it the enemy of free speech?

ADVERTISEMENT**UTILITIES**

[E-mail story](#)
 [Most e-mails](#)
 [Printer-frier version](#)

MORE HEADLINE:

[Lauren's Men Target](#)
 [Karaoke's Sti](#)
 [Industrial-Str Designs](#)
 [Michael Moor Insurance Horror](#)
 [Wines And W](#)

RELATED**TOP JOBS**

from [CareerBu](#)

[FAMILY NURSE PRACTITIONER](#)

Media Kit
Services

"Truth No. 1 is that blasphemy is in the eye of the beholder," said Andrew Walsh, associate director of Trinity College's Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religions in Public Life. "One person's honest critique is another's blasphemy."

In general, those in the secular world believe they cannot blaspheme if they don't subscribe to the teachings of whatever group is setting the rules on blasphemy.

However, Walsh said, there are believers who want to hold nonbelievers accountable for blasphemy. "And that's true for people who don't like 'The Book of Daniel' as well as people who don't like caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad," he said.

That's why it happens that the Danish newspaper editors believe what they did is not blasphemous, while believers in Islam may consider it so.

"The sad reality is that groups have already interacted by insulting each other's religions," said Walsh. "In most cases, certainly in the Danish case, it's a calculated insult. In the West, we are allowed to make calculated insults in the name of freedom of speech."

There is much less latitude in Muslim societies, where it's actually "a good deed to whack the blasphemers," he said.

Given the tension in the Arab world and the conflict between Arab immigrants and citizens of some European nations, Walsh said it's "sort of stupid for the Danish [to publish the cartoons, then] go around saying, 'Can't they take a joke?'"

Kelly McBride, a journalism ethics expert at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., said, "The idea of freedom of the press is that you can say whatever you want. That's true. You absolutely can, but it doesn't mean you necessarily should."

She said the role of journalists is different from those in the entertainment industry, but in each case people would do well to examine their purposes before publishing something that they should know will offend a lot of people.

"Why would you publish a cartoon of Muhammad with a bomb in his turban?" she asked. "Why would you put Kanye West on the front page of Rolling Stone as Jesus? Is it because you want to provoke discussion, inspire commentary, get people to think about issues as they've never thought about before?"

She said she believes that is what happened in Denmark, when the cultural editor of the newspaper Jyllands-Posten wanted to explore the issue of whether there had been a chilling effect on society's ability to discuss issues of Islam, including a Muslim prohibition on publication of depictions of Muhammad.

But if the goal was to spark dialogue, McBride said, a cartoon was not the way to go. "Political cartoons tick people off," she said. "It makes them laugh or makes them angry ... but they don't usually inspire dialogue."

A more thoughtful, balanced piece of writing might have led to discussion rather

CHILD AND FAMI
AGENCY

REGISTERED NI
TOLLAND HIGH S

MEDICAL OFFIC
NURSE / LPN / I
HARTFORD TRAN
ASSOC.

AUTOMOTIVE S
MANAGER
STEPHEN AUTO M
CENTRE

CONVENIENCE
MANAGERS /
TRAINEES / AS
MANAGERS
XTRA MART

NURSING
OPPORTUNITIE
CHARLOTTE HUN
HOSPITAL

PURCHASING
ASSISTANT
CT TRANSIT

BOOKKEEPER /
ACCOUNTANT
HEMLOCK HILL R

LEGISLATIVE AI
ADMINISTRATI
ADVISOR
STATE OF CT

SR.COMMERCIA
UNDERWRITER
FARM FAMILY CA

[View All Top](#)
[Post A J](#)

than violence, she adds.

In a pluralistic society like the United States, it's hard to imagine a cartoon or a movie or television show inciting violence, but it certainly can cause lots of protest and reaction.

Elayne Rapping, a University of Buffalo professor of American Studies who specializes in media, said that in more freethinking times, "art was filled with blasphemy. It was a time when political statements in art shows were very common."

She thinks it's no coincidence that instances of so-called blasphemy seem to be more prevalent, and she believes it's been prompted by an outrage Americans are feeling. "It isn't just about religion. It's about an attack on what has become an increasingly odious ideology that's running this country," said Rapping. "Bush is born-again. He says it all the time."

"The Book of Daniel" was canceled because no one would sponsor it, said Rapping. "It showed Jesus as a person, and ... the priest was addicted to Vicodin, and so it upset the religious right," she said.

Rapping said she doesn't think the producers of the "Book of Daniel" understood how inflammatory the show would be. "The thought was that anything goes," she said. "Sex and violence does, but when you are attacking Christianity, that is a really hot-button issue in this country."

And, as is evident, when something is called blasphemous, it's sure to get our attention.

"When was the last time that most Americans knew what was on the cover of Rolling Stone?" said Bob Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. (Asked about the cover, a spokesman for Rolling Stone said in an e-mail that it was the result of a "true collaboration between the photographer and the subject.")

"When all is said and done," Thompson said, "as long as there have been spaces carved out as sacred, there have been people blaspheming those spaces."

It's also clear, he said, that if "everybody in the world had to obey the restriction of what is sacred to other groups in the world ... we would have an awful lot of restricted territory."

Reach Kathleen Megan at kmegan@courant.com.

Interact with The Courant:

- > **Email** Reader Rep. Karen Hunter with comments.
- > **Visit** Karen's daily Blog.
- > **View** today's corrections.
- > **Subscribe** to The Courant.
- > **Search** our archives from 1764-1922 and 1992-2006.

[» Courant.com](#)

[» Advertise Online](#)

[» Shopping](#)

[» Real E](#)

[» About Us](#)

[» Privacy Policy](#)

[» Jobs](#)

[» Classif](#)

[» Contact Us](#)

[» Terms Of Service](#)

[» Cars](#)

[» Entert](#)

courant.com is Copyright © 2006 by The Hartford Courant

Partners: [CareerBuilder.com](#) for [Jobs](#) | [Cars.com](#) for [Autos](#) | [Apartments.com](#) for [Rentals](#) | [ShopLocal.com](#) for [Sh](#)