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Images offensive to Muslims are debated

Free-speech advocates unveil Danish cartoons during panel discussion at Hopkins

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Charles Mitchell sat before a full-color blowup of the most notorious of the newspaper cartoons that have roiled the Islamic world - the one that shows the Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban in the shape of a bomb - and said that how it makes Muslims feel was beside the point.

"There is no right not to be offended," Mitchell, a program officer with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, told an audience of about 80 last night at the **Johns Hopkins University**. "Having your most deeply held convictions questioned doesn't destroy you. It doesn't turn you into a child. It makes you question why you have them. That's good for us. That's why we come to college."

But Bash Pharoan called the image unnecessarily hurtful.

"It indicates that all Muslims are terrorists, or potentially could be terrorists," said Pharoan, president of the Baltimore County Muslim Council. "It means that the Prophet Muhammad teaches terrorism. If you look at the face, it's an ugly face. ... It really gives the



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impression that Arabs or Muslims are ugly people and that they do ugly things."

Mitchell and Pharoan were members of a panel discussion at which free-speech advocates unveiled the Danish cartoons that most U.S. media have declined to publish. The event was organized by a student group that created a flap at Hopkins last month when members posted copies of the cartoons around the university's Homewood campus.

"We thought that basically it was important to address the self-censorship that we were observing in the Western media," said Hopkins senior Dorian Leary, president of the campus Objectivist Club. "There were these violent reactions around the world, and we thought it was important to show these cartoons."

The images, first published in a Danish newspaper in September and subsequently republished in several European outlets, have provoked riots across the Muslim world. Islamic law generally is interpreted as prohibiting even favorable depictions of Muhammad.

Scores have been killed in the violence. Many see the unrest as symptomatic of deeper frustrations in the Muslim world, both with the West and the region's own governments.

In declining to reprint the cartoons, producers and editors in the United States have noted a reluctance to offend Muslim members of their audience. They have said it is enough to describe the images in news accounts. Critics have described the riots as an assault on free speech, and have accused the media of cowardice.

"Once these cartoons were printed in Denmark and the violence erupted in the Muslim world, every Western newspaper should have published these cartoons in a show of support to the Danish newspaper, to show support for free speech," Yaron Brook, president of the Ayn Rand Institute, told the Hopkins audience.

"Remember, we're talking about the fact that there's a fatwa against these cartoonists, they've got death threats, they're in hiding," Brook said. "We should be out on the barricades fighting for the right of the cartoonists to publish whatever they want."

At Hopkins, reaction to the cartoons last month was comparatively muted, a university spokesman said.

"What we have here is a very small group of students who are trying to get some attention for themselves," spokesman Dennis O'Shea said. "The university very much regrets that a very small group of students has chosen to exercise their right to free speech in a way that was calculated really only to hurt fellow students rather than shed light on the issue.

"That being said, they do have free speech, and there's a tradition on this campus and at other universities of people being free to speak their minds."

Leary said the Objectivist Club - eight students who explore and promote the work of the 20th-century writer Ayn Rand - set out to provoke discussion, not to hurt classmates.

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"It wasn't a stunt," he said. "Our intent was not just to get feelings riled up. ... We think it was a serious issue that needed to be discussed, and we thought that this was the proper way to bring it to the table."

At the request of the Ayn Rand Institute, O'Shea said, Hopkins bolstered security with a dozen officers at the event at **Shriver Hall**. The institute, in Irvine, Calif., is planning to display the cartoons at similar events on campuses throughout the country.

"There's another context here, and that is that we're at war," Brook said. "This event cannot be separated from Sept. 11, cannot be separated from what's going on across the Middle East, Hamas' victory in the Palestinian territories. We're at war with a particular ideology, and every time we let them win on a particular issue, they are going to get stronger, enrollment for their cause will increase and they will become more aggressive."

A spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington said he had been informed of the event, and was dismissive about it.

"My response? It's a free country," spokesman Ibrahim Hooper said in a telephone interview. "They've been e-mailing me multiple times in an apparent attempt to bait us into attacking the event somehow to gain them some cheap publicity."

"When it seems to be that they're just trying to publicize their agenda by intentionally trying to provoke Muslims into some kind of irrational reaction, we have no obligation to cooperate."

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