

Letter to the Editor

Sensitivity called for

The Cape Town Interfaith Initiative exists on the basis of trust. We pledge to model compassionate and sensitive interaction between people of varying religious persuasions. Zapiro's recent cartoon commenting on the lack of a sense of humour amongst the followers of Islam was bound to cause offence in the Muslim community. Although itself a comment on a more malicious declaration by certain Facebook group calling for the 20th May 2010 to be kept as a 'Everybody Draw Muhammad Day'.

Ironically on that same day, the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative hosted the launch of The Charter for Compassion in Cape Town in the presence of distinguished religious leaders.

One line from the Charter reads:

"It is also necessary for us ... to refrain consistently and emphatically from inflicting pain... We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in a polarized world."

While we certainly acknowledge the right to free speech and to voice one's opinion without fear, we also believe that this right exists with a concomitant responsibility which the Mail and Guardian itself acknowledges when it says:

"Of course the right to freedom of expression is not absolute. I would not have published a cartoon that amounted to hate speech or incitement to violence, both of which are debarred by the Constitution."

Our disappointment does not arise from the fact that it was necessarily insulting or inciting violence but rather due to a lack of sensitivity to the beliefs of those who hold the Prophet Muhammed dear to their hearts and who (while not resorting to violence) are nonetheless deeply saddened by the image.

Whilst acknowledging the important role of social and political criticism, and particularly satire as a catalyst in this regard, we feel that sensitivities are, and should be integral to such a role. Invitations to such critical thought, pondering and deliberation should be undertaken in a manner befitting it; with wisdom, eloquence and thoughtfulness.

In line with the Charter for Compassion we trust our Muslim community to display a rational, dignified, and compassionate face of Islam with reverence, restraint, and humility and we call on all voices who speak in the public domain to do so consciously, showing sensitivity and affording dignity and respect to all.

Fr. John Oliver

Cape Town Interfaith Initiative