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# An imam explains why Muslims hate seeing depictions of the Prophet Muhammad

Sikander Hashmi of the Kanata Muslim Association discusses the Charlie Hebdo massacre, freedom of speech, and how to fight extremist rhetoric



Sikander Hashmi, the imam at the Kanata Muslim Association, paying his respects at the site of the Parliament Hill shooting in Ottawa in October.

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Ishmael N. Daro

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This week's horrific attack on the offices of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris has sparked an important discussion about the power of satire, the right to publish offensive or even "blasphemous" materials in a free society, and where freedom of speech and respect for religion overlap and sometimes clash.

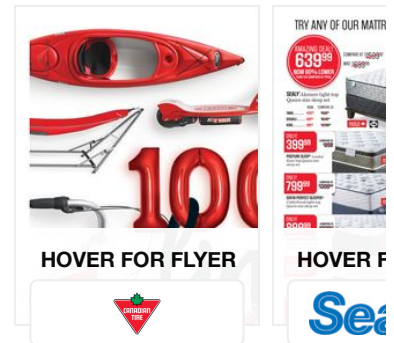
At the heart of the debate is the Islamic prohibition on depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. While there is no specific verse in the Qu'ran that outlaws representations of the prophet, the Muslim holy book discourages idolatry; several hadith — a record of the sayings and actions of Muhammad — prohibit Muslims from creating images of human figures. Taken together, this is widely understood by many Muslims as a prohibition on images of Muhammad.

It's the willingness of *Charlie Hebdo* editors to break that taboo, often in insulting and racially-charged ways, that is now cited as the likely motive for the shooters.

Following the Parliament Hill shooting in October, I spoke with Imam Sikander Hashmi after he and other local Muslim leaders paid their respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where Cpl. Nathan Cirilo had been killed. Hashmi is the imam at the Kanata Muslims Association and a member of the Council of Imams of Ottawa-Gatineau. He spoke then of his grief and fury that someone had "spread bloodshed and violence in my homeland." I reached out to him again this week to talk about the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, the wisdom of republishing the newspaper's cartoons, and the challenges within the Muslim-Canadian community of fighting extremist ideologies.

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Sikander Hashmi, the imam at the Kanata Muslim Association, shakes the hand of a police officer and says thank you after leaving flowers at the site. [Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen]

*(Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.)*

**As always happens with incidents like this, there are a lot more questions than answers right now. Specifically: what some people claim enraged the attackers and precipitated this massacre is the prohibition on depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. Is that prohibition a live issue in your community? Do non-Muslims properly understand where that comes from and why it's such a sensitive point for followers of Islam?**

First of all, I think we probably should question or at least revisit this narrative now that it was because of the cartoons, because the cartoons were published almost five years ago. What would prompt these thugs and criminals to actually go ahead and do this at this time? One indication could be that the newspaper actually took on ISIS just this week with the headline that there haven't been any attacks in France. There was a character turbaned with a Kalashnikov saying, "Wait, we still have until the end of January to extend our wishes." They also tweeted about the ISIS kingpin, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, giving him best wishes. This suggests, in my mind at least, that this could probably have more to do with ISIS and their feelings being hurt as opposed to the cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. This could be a case that perhaps they're

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using that as some sort of cover excuse to gain sympathy, which clearly has not worked, because most of the world is enraged and it would be very disingenuous and treacherous of them, even more so beyond the terrible act that they committed, to actually be using the Prophet Muhammad as an excuse for this type of action.



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But as far as the depictions go, clearly as Muslims we're taught to love God, to love the prophets, all the prophets but in particular the Prophet Muhammad as well. So for myself, my love for the Prophet is greater than my love for my parents, for anyone else in the world. That's how many Muslims feel about the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

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Now, for the depictions, there is a generally understood to be a prohibition on all types of depictions of prophets, so this is not specific to Muhammad himself, but to all the other prophets as well, to ensure that people don't start idolizing and worshiping the prophets. That could, of course lead to idolatry as has happened in the past, which is considered to be a serious matter in Islam. That's why we don't generally find depictions.

It doesn't really come up in our discussions or in our daily lives. There are different descriptions of the Prophet that have been recorded and I think most Muslims are quite satisfied with that.

**My understanding as an admittedly lapsed Muslim is that it is essentially against idolatry, because you are supposed to worship God, not Muhammad who was his messenger — and you're not supposed to confuse the two.**

That's right. Exactly.

**There are some examples of depictions of Muhammad throughout history, sometimes originating with Muslim artists and scholars as well. Sometimes he's shown as a flame, although other times as a human figure. Is the strict prohibition perhaps a more recent phenomenon? What's the historical context here?**

Perhaps. I mean, you're right. There have been times where people have, artists, Muslims and perhaps others as well, have tried to take the written descriptions and put them into an image of the Prophet. But you know, I'm not sure if the type of response that we have seen as of late, regarding depictions of the Prophet has to do with the depictions themselves or whether it's about the negative depictions. My hunch is that it has a lot more to do with the negativity associated with the depictions and the message that they're sending as opposed to the actual depiction itself. Let's say for the sake of argument that somebody drew a picture that they said was the Prophet Muhammad, and it was actually very positive, and there was no malicious intent behind it and it was actually conveying a positive message; I find it hard to think that there would be the same type outcry.

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I think it has a lot more to do with the way it is projected and the type of message that it carries. But I'm not aware of this type of outcry in the past regarding [neutral or positive] depictions.

**There is a danger of accepting at face value the reasoning of extremists that actually helps legitimize their worldview, that any image of the Prophet Muhammad is enough to set off a murderous rage. It's almost giving them too much credit, isn't it?**

Yeah, I definitely think so. For the record, a lot of Muslims, even those who may not have been very devout, were very hurt and upset by the cartoon controversy [of 2005, when Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published a series of images] and the movies and the films and so on that depicted the Prophet Muhammad. But again, I believe it was because of the negativity associated with that — people were generally hurt. I was hurt as well, because as I said, for many Muslims, they value and love the Prophet more than they would love anyone else, including their own parents. To me, if someone is poking fun at or cursing or making ill mention of the Prophet, it's more hurtful to me than someone doing the same to my mother or to my father, for example.

Generally, I feel there is a lot of hurt and a lot of anger but how that is manifested then I think is what differentiates the general response from the response of an extremist, a violent extremist versus an ordinary Muslim. The ordinary Muslim may be upset, may perhaps go to a protest, may write an article, may write a poem. May put up some posts on Facebook or Twitter for example. Some have taken very positive routes. I remember I was in Kingston at Queen's University and a students' association was actually handing out roses at the main intersection on campus with the sayings of the Prophet, which were very positive and it was taken very positively.

People will express their outrage and channel their anger in different ways and, unfortunately, those who are ignorant of the actual teachings and/or who don't know how to place historical teachings in the current context will take things at face value and will simply resort to violence and say, "Hey, you know

what? This is the way it used to be done in the past or it was done in an instance, somewhere, somehow and therefore we're going to go ahead and do the same thing." I think that's what differentiates the extremists from the ordinary Muslims.



A vigil outside The French Institute in London on January 9, 2015 for the 12 victims of the attack on the Paris offices of satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo. [Justin Tallis]

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**As a teacher yourself, within your community, is there worry about how people come to understand Islam and things like jihad? Is that an ongoing conversation within your community and among Canadian Muslims in general, about the split between the popular understand of the faith and the actual teachings of peace and tolerance?**

Well you see, the thing with jihad is, I think that one of the biggest problems is that it's such a loaded term that almost no one wants to use it. That, I feel, is actually contributing to the problem.

A lot of Muslims will actually refer to jihad as the "J word," because they're just afraid of having someone hear them mention the word or even worried about their phones being tapped or bugs in their homes or in the mosques, so they won't even mention the word.

Now the problem is that of course, jihad exists as a concept in a broad way in Islamic teaching. Literally, it means "struggle." The great jihad is the struggle within one's self between right and wrong, which of course, everyone experiences. But then

there also is the element of an armed struggle and it is something that can't be denied. It is in Islamic teachings, in the primary sources — of course, in its appropriate context at the time. What's actually happening is that because of the reluctance to openly discuss the matter, and to give the correct context and enable young people especially to understand it in the right way. Because of that reluctance they want to find answers. They're not getting it in the community, so then they go online.

Once they go online, then they are easily influenced unfortunately a lot of times by rhetoric and by propaganda coming from groups like ISIS, who have their own agendas at hand, who are clearly taking things out of context and basically that's how they operate. Then young people easily fall for that type of rhetoric and propaganda. I think these conversations definitely need to take place. They need to take place openly within the Muslim community, in the appropriate setting. So maybe not a Friday sermon, but in an academic setting, where people are encouraged to ask questions and they're able to inquire about these verses and sayings of the Prophet that do talk about armed struggle. Then they're able to process all of that and put it in the right context today. If we don't do that, then unfortunately I think people will just continue to fall prey to propaganda and rhetoric.

We also have to look at the other factors, and the fact is that these incidents are not happening in a vacuum. They were not happening 20 years ago, but today they are – in the context of growing frustration over the loss of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives in the Iraq war; discrimination, racism, ghettoization (especially in Europe), inaction in Syria despite years of war and brutal human suffering and so on. So it's high time that Muslim leaders, law enforcement, politicians, social workers, academics and others got together on a national level and seriously talked about what's happening and how it can be tackled. Imams are ready to do their part but we can't do it all alone. Education is just part of the solution.

**I noticed you prefer the term “ordinary Muslims” when talking about the majority of believers. Meanwhile in the**



**public discourse there's always talk about so-called "moderate Muslims" and the responsibility of those "moderate Muslims" to stand up against extremism. Can you talk about that?**

The problem I find with terms such as moderate and extremist is they're very relative. No one wants to be known as an extremist. Everyone wants to be known as some sort of moderate, unless they're part of the very small minority who enjoys being called extremists.

I prefer ordinary because the vast majority of Muslims, especially in Canada, but also around the world, simply want to live peacefully. They want to get on with their lives. They want to have good jobs. They want to support their families, they want to have a roof over their head and they just want to live in peace. They just want to do what ordinary people everywhere else want to have in their lives.

That's why I refer to them as ordinary. Now, in their own views, they may have some views which may appear to be very moderate to some people. They may have other views which may appear to be somewhat extreme to others. But you know what? If we live in a free country, people are allowed to hold whatever opinions and beliefs that they want to hold as long as they're not hurting anyone else. As long as they're not promoting violence. I think that should be the bottom line.

Once we get into this approach of judging people and seeing whether they're moderate or whether they're extreme, I think we really open up a Pandora's Box, because now we are actually opening the door to actually examining people's beliefs and opinions and using our judgment to figure out whether they fit in or not. We're talking about freedom of speech a lot nowadays. I think we really need to put that into a practical sense and say, "You know what? You really are free to say whatever you want, believe whatever you want and to hold whatever beliefs and opinions that you like provided that you're not hurting anyone else, you're respecting the laws of the land. Anything else apart from that is really your business and you're free to hold that view."

That's why I very much prefer the term ordinary as opposed to moderate and extremist. Do we have a problem in terms of people holding views that go contrary to the laws of the land? Yes, we do to some extent. Do we have a problem with people hurting others and using the violence illegally? Of course we have a problem with that and that's something we definitely need to deal with.



TOPSHOTS A Muslim man holds a placard, reading "Not in my name", during a gathering on January 9, 2015 near the mosque of Saint-Etienne, eastern France, after the country's bloodiest attack in half a century on the offices of the weekly satirical Charlie Hebdo killing 12 people on January 7. [AFP PHOTO]

**Finally, many people on social media and certain news outlets are re-publishing some of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. Some as part of their news coverage, some in solidarity or as a political statement, and some people perhaps more provocatively. Do you have any thoughts on that?**

Do I like the fact that they're doing it? No, of course I don't enjoy it. I think it is hurtful, but does that mean that I'm going to respond in a negative or violent way? Of course not. I think at the end of the day, what people should realize regarding freedom of speech is that of course it's a value. I think the Muslims and anyone else who can be offended due to one reason or another needs to realize that freedom of speech is a very important value. That's something we of course understand and respect.

At the same time, it needs to be— Just because you have the right to do something doesn't necessarily mean that you need to go out and do the worst possible thing that you can do with that right. I think we definitely should be trying to use our rights in a way that's positive and constructive, that actually brings people together. That's certainly what I'm trying to do with the rights that I cherish, here in my country, in Canada. I would encourage everyone else that we should always be trying to use whatever means we have available in a very productive and a very positive way.

Going back to people re-publishing the cartoons: For those who are trying to respond to the initial cartoons with violence, obviously it hasn't worked and it never works because of course people are just emboldened to do more of what you hate. I certainly see why people might be wanting to keep sharing but, do I like it? No, I don't. Do I find it to be hurtful? Yes, I do. But at the same time, I do understand that it is a right and it comes in the packages. It's part of the package of rights that we all enjoy and therefore that's something that I need to accept and I will try to respond in a positive way.

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