

## Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!

Blazing Catfur, <http://blazingcatfur.blogspot.com/2011/05/mark-mercero-on-2nd-annual-everybody.html>

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“Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” What a great idea! 20 May 2011 will be the second annual celebration of the creativity, freedom, and fearlessness that this day so well represents.

Word of last year’s “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” didn’t travel as far and wide as it should have. This year, let’s see everyone with pen, pencil, or crayon in hand, doing her or his best to represent the Prophet of Islam.

One’s drawing doesn’t have to be mocking or even comedic. It can be respectful and reverent. It can include “pbuh,” and you can be sincere in wishing Mohammed peace in your drawing. More than a few Muslims, I’m sure, especially among the artists, have long been chafing against this restriction in their communities. Let us help them to reclaim suppressed traditions in Islamic art, or to push Islamic art in new directions, as Islamic artists, as artists, would want to do.

Now of course for artists there’s nothing special about 20 May. For artists especially, every day should be a day on which one may draw Mohammed. If you are an artist and representing Mohammed in your work seems the sound thing to do artistically, then don’t wait for the 20<sup>th</sup>. Don’t burden your viewer with irrelevant associations to this political and cultural event. Be true to your art, and to it alone.

Yet we need political and cultural events like “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” because, sadly, not every day is a day on which anyone can draw Mohammed without risking limb or life. That’s one important reason we need a special day.

Countering the threat of violence, though, is not the only reason we need this event. We need it also because not every day is a day on which one’s drawing of Mohammed will be evaluated on its own terms, whatever those terms might be. Maybe one is making a joke in one’s drawing, or experimenting with line, or telling a story, or propagandizing for (or against) Islam. Trouble is, right now every drawing of Mohammed is a provocation or a political statement, whether that’s what one means or not.

“Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” is a day set aside just for provocation, just for the simple political or social message conveyed by that provocation. Once any day is a day one may safely draw Mohammed and expect people to try to appreciate your drawing for what it is, we won’t need an “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” (Perhaps

it will become an event in Muslim communities, in which Muslims draw Mohammed and view pictures of Mohammed for the insights into Islam their makers hope to offer.)

The task of “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” is to rouse people to their best values: no matter how offended or upset one is by something someone has drawn, one ought not respond violently. Indeed, one ought not call for punishment or even censorship. Security of the person, wellbeing, and freedom of expression are to be valued by everyone, including those offended or upset by representations of Mohammed, even vile representations.

Will it work? Will “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” succeed in making it safe to draw whatever one wants to draw? Will it help to galvanize citizens and politicians in the struggle to maintain and extend freedom of expression?

Maybe it’s too soon to say, though perhaps sociologists or historians can give us evidence one way or the other. The day is, at least, a statement in favour of wonderful things. It’s also a statement of confidence in society and, importantly, in ordinary Muslims. People participating in “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” are telling the world that the liberal order hasn’t collapsed entirely yet and, importantly, that they know that most Muslims handle their feelings properly, at least to the extent that they don’t issue threats or condone issuing threats. We’ll also see whether Muslims handle their feelings properly to the extent that they don’t call for censorship or complain that the day violates their rights.

Of course, Muslims and anyone else should be free to say what they want about “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” They should be free to be offended and to get upset. They have no reason, though, to be offended or to get upset, even those who don’t like the thing and wish it never to occur. Let me explain.

People who would draw Mohammed but refrain from doing so must be refraining from one or both of two reasons. They must be refraining either because they fear the consequences or because they don’t want to offend people or hurt their feelings. But people shouldn’t refrain from engaging in harmless activities out of fear of being beat up or worse. Nor should they refrain from pursuing their projects out of a concern not to offend others, especially when no one should be offended by their projects. And no one, no Muslim, should be offended by someone drawing Mohammed.

What is the reason Muslims have for not drawing Mohammed? Actually, it doesn’t matter for the point I’m making. What matters is that whatever their reason is, it isn’t to avoid giving offence. Muslims who accept the prohibition on representations of Mohammed have an argument for it that draws on Islamic lore. This reason makes sense to them only through their understanding of that lore. That means, though, that it is a reason that can motivate only Muslims.

The proper attitude for a Muslim to take toward someone who profanes Islam or its Prophet, then, is indifference or forgiveness. After all, the profaner doesn’t know what he is doing, or else he would be a Muslim himself.

Well, one might say, we know that some Muslims will be offended, whether they should be or not. Isn’t that reason enough to refrain from drawing Mohammed or encouraging others to draw Mohammed? After all, we want to treat people well, don’t we?

Yes, we do, but the ill treatment here runs in the other direction. We show each other disrespect when we interfere with each other’s legitimate projects. Drawing

Mohammed even just for the sake of drawing Mohammed is a legitimate project. So, too, clearly, is drawing him as part of a political statement in favour of security and freedom. People who would claim their hurt feelings set a standard for my behaviour are interfering with my legitimate projects. That's to treat me with disrespect.

No one has to like that people draw Mohammed, but we each have a duty of respect not to get offended or upset that they do.