

ART AND BLASPHEMY

“How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?”

Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

Two years ago, the publication of several caricatures of Mohammed in various periodicals around the world (first in Denmark, as a joke, then in other countries, as an act of defiance) ignited the furious protest of various Islamist groups. Now, after the arrest in Denmark of three people accused of plotting to kill the artist, a number of Danish newspapers have reprinted one of these cartoons as a reminder of the essential right of freedom of speech.

History repeats itself: faith, which is supposed to be the unmovable pillar of a true believer, seems to shiver and shake when confronted with a mere artistic creation, with a brushstroke or a few scribbled words while, in the name of the Supreme Being, his followers announce the imminence of a fit of divine temper.

That an cruel or violent act might infuriate the Creator of the Universe (or his Prophet) is understandable, since no author (with or without a capital A) enjoys seeing his work mangled or destroyed. To kill, to torture, to humiliate, to abuse a fellow creature is no doubt a crime in the eyes of God, and I suppose that believers have every right to see in the fact that a new Universal Deluge does not take place every month, proof of the inexhaustible divine patience. That creatures such as Pinochet, Bush and Ben Laden are allowed to lead a comfortable existence, shows that God certainly possesses a most inhuman patience.

But to declare, at the same time, that a cartoon, a joke, a play on words might offend Him for whom eternity is like a day, or his blessed elect among all men, seems to me the greatest of blasphemies. We, feeble human beings, may feel bothered by someone making fun of us; but surely that can't be the reaction of a being we imagine supreme, incorruptible, omniscient. Borges suggested that of God's literary tastes we know nothing; it is difficult to imagine that Someone who knows everything and whose generous

aesthetic sense led Him both to the creation of the poetic antelope and the tasteless joke of the hippopotamus, would ban from His night-table the works of Diderot, of Mark Twain, of Salman Rushdie. Mohammed was all for laughter: “Keep your heart light at every moment, because when the heart is downcast the soul becomes blind.”

The great religious figures of the past, because they were also intelligent human beings, did not lack a sense of humour. Christ (in Jerome’s Latin version) made fun of Peter with a silly pun. “Your name is Peter (*Petrus*) and on this stone (*petra*) I’ll build my church.” When Buddha was about to cross a desert, the gods, with the intention of protecting Him from the sun, threw down parasols from their various heavens. So as not to offend any of them, the Buddha politely multiplied Himself and each of the gods saw a Buddha carrying the parasol he had sent Him. According to the *Midrash*, Moses was asked why God (who knows everything) had asked “Adam, where are you?” when he sought him out in the Garden after the episode with the apple. Moses answered: “Thereby did God attempt to teach us good manners, since it is not polite to enter someone else’s house without announcing yourself first.” In the first volume of the *Al-Mustatraf* it is told that a poor man came to see Mohammed and asked him to grant him a camel to ride. “I’ll grant you the young of a camel,” said Mohammed. “But the young of a camel will not stand my weight!” the man complained. “You asked for a camel,” Mohammed answered. “Don’t you know that every camel is by force the young of another camel?”

The word “blasphemy” comes from the Greek and means “to offend someone.” In Greek mythology, blasphemy depends on the sensitivity of the blasphemed god. Athena punishes the young Arachne by turning her into a spider, because she had boasted of being a better weaver than the goddess. For the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, the notion of blasphemy becomes confused with that of heresy, except that, thanks to a bureaucratic nicety, Muslims and Jews could not be accused of heresy because they had never confessed to being believers. They could, however, be accused of insulting God and His saints, and not only through words and actions (by saying, for instance, that fortune, not God, rules our lives) but also through

thought, what was known as “blaspheming with the heart.” An edict of 538, signed by the Emperor Justinian, declared that the punishment for blasphemy was death, but the sentence was rarely carried out. In the Judeo-Christian world, the notion of blasphemy is today still legally valid: in the United States, for instance, various religious groups have succeeded in having withdrawn from school libraries books that, in their opinion, insult their God. This is how writers as diverse as Roald Dahl, J. D. Salinger and J.K. Rowling have seen themselves included among such banished classics as Jonathan Swift and William Faulkner.

The famous tenth sutra of the Koran (10:100) reads: “No soul may believe without the permission of God.” In the beginning of the eighth century, the illustrious theologian Hasan Al-Basri understood this to mean that “we cannot desire good without God desiring it for us.” Believers must therefore be content with the conviction that they have been chosen by divine grace and not demand from those whom God has not seen fit to be elected an equal devotion. Let the others mock: that too (if we continue the argument) is due to God’s will (whose reasons are inscrutable). The faithful say that their God demands from them sacrifice and resilience. No doubt, proof of this is that He has decreed the existence of a few court jesters, heirs to Voltaire, to Erasmus, to Rabelais, who, following the advice of Horace (another of God’s creations) advocate teaching through laughter.

Barcelona, 19 February 2008