

Muhammad on South Park

When South Park is censored, then things are a lot worse than we thought they were. Here's an extract from an Op Ed piece that appeared in The New York Times on April 26th written by Ross Douthat.

You can't portray Muhammad on American television anymore, as South Park's creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, discovered in 2006, when they tried to parody the Danish cartoon controversy – in which unflattering caricatures of the prophet prompted worldwide riots – by scripting another animated appearance for Muhammad. The episode aired, but the cameo itself was blacked out, replaced by an announcement that Comedy Central had refused to show an image of the prophet.

For Parker and Stone, the obvious next step was to make fun of the fact that you can't broadcast an image of Muhammad. Two weeks ago, "South Park" brought back the "super best friends," but this time Muhammad never showed his face. He "appeared" from inside a U-Haul trailer, and then from inside a mascot's costume.

These gimmicks then prompted a writer for the New York-based Web site revolutionmuslim.com to predict that Parker and Stone would end up like Theo van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker murdered in 2004 for his scathing critiques of Islam. The writer, an American convert to Islam named Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee, didn't technically threaten to kill them himself. His post, and the accompanying photo of van Gogh's corpse, was just "a warning ... of what will likely happen to them."

This passive-aggressive death threat provoked a swift response from Comedy Central. In last week's follow-up episode, the prophet's non-appearance appearances were censored, and every single reference to Muhammad was bleeped out. The historical record was quickly scrubbed as well: The original "Super Best Friends" episode is no longer available on the Internet.

In a way, the muzzling of "South Park" is no more disquieting than any other example of Western institutions' cowering before the threat of Islamist violence. It's no worse than the German opera house that temporarily suspended performances of Mozart's opera "Idomeneo" because it included a scene featuring Muhammad's severed head. Or Random House's decision to cancel the publication of a novel about the prophet's third wife. Or Yale University Press's refusal to publish the controversial Danish cartoons ... in a book about the Danish cartoon crisis. Or the fact that various Western journalists, intellectuals and politicians – the list includes Oriana Fallaci in Italy, Michel Houellebecq in France, Mark Steyn in Canada and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands – have been hauled

before courts and “human rights” tribunals, in supposedly liberal societies, for daring to give offense to Islam.

But there’s still a sense in which the “South Park” case is particularly illuminating. Not because it tells us anything new about the lines that writers and entertainers suddenly aren’t allowed to cross. But because it’s a reminder that Islam is just about the only place where we draw any lines at all.

South Park, as anyone under the age of fifty who watches television knows, has made fun of everything and everyone, including most religions. When this iconic TV program capitulates, two things are clear to me. One is that any religion that cannot live with being made fun of is in decline. It may take as long as it took for the Ottoman Empire to collapse, but it will. The second is that any society that doesn’t tolerate making fun of any religion is also doomed intellectually. Compromising intellectual freedom leads to ossification if not numerical collapse.

European intellectual society has betrayed itself. Some argue it did it when Jean-Paul Sartre ostracized Albert Camus for daring to distance himself from USSR communism. American academia is in danger of going that way too.

I subscribe to the New York Review of Books in spite of its flaws, such as Tony Judt writing about being Jewish. He might be an excellent historian, but what he calls Jewish and what I call Jewish have absolutely nothing in common. When he writes about his version, I cringe. But the good in the NYR far outweighs the bad. Something I cannot say for the London Review of Books, a kind of intellectual Amnesty International, pretending to be objective but not.

The attempt at a new Jewish Review of Books strikes me as infelicitous and farcical unless the quality of its writing far exceeds that of the NYR. It is another example of how to throw money away tilting at the wrong windmills. It is only going to preach to the choir.

The real drive needs to be to ensure that at universities, from where the next generation of intellectual opinion-makers will come, are exposed to libertarian, objective, and contrarian opinions, so that they will not become the cowardly failures who kowtow to bullying like Comedy Central, Yale, etc., etc.

I used to enjoy watching Comedy Central irreverence—Bill Maher’s demolition of silly religion. Now I know they are cowards, only going for soft targets but chickening out in the face of bullies. In the long run, as I have said before, any religion that tries to suppress criticism or objects to a little harmless satire has lost it. For this reason alone, I say long live Dawkins, Hitchens, and their nutty crew. At least they have guts. The only way to stop fundamentalism from winning is to keep on pushing back at the bullies.