

The Catch-22

By Scott Kennedy

Your mother's a whore. Whoa, where did that come from? No, I didn't see your mama behind the woodshed; nope I said that for the simple reason that I am allowed to. Our society is based on the ideals of free speech & free expression, no matter how reprehensible it can be. However, free speech has become a bit of a political hot potato at the moment.

It all started a couple of weeks back when some political cartoonist from Denmark got himself into a bit of hot H2O. He must have known he was going to get himself in the shit when he drew "the cartoons". The Prophet Mohamed is a pretty important dude for folks of the Muslim variety. And here he was depicted as a terrorist, with a bomb in his headscarf. Fairly provocative, connecting a few dots that in the current uber-PC world we live in, you just aren't allowed to do. He implied that terrorists are Muslims & perhaps vice versa. Pretty taboo.

So on one side you have western, Christian countries printing & re-printing a cartoon that is extremely offensive to people of the Muslim faith. And when opposition is raised in the west, it becomes an issue of free speech. The argument is that the press should be allowed to print whatever they want. After all, the purpose of the media is not only to inform, but to spark discussion. Discussion that will help individuals to form their own opinions on issues. But needless to say Muslims around the world united to be extremely pissed off over the whole thing.

And now, in the circus that is the United States, there is "The South Park Episode". This one shows a statue of the Virgin Mary that is bleeding, not tears of blood, but blood from a source that women all over the world can relate to. And to cap it off The Pope happens to be in the line of fire. Again, pretty full on stuff. This time it's the Catholic Church's turn to spit the dummy. There was a huge reaction when the cartoon aired both here and in the States. There were calls to boycott C4 and it's sister station TV3 because they dared to run the offensive episode.

Hold on a sec. TV3 ran the cartoons, the Muslim ones, under the guise of free speech. And then C4 ran the South Park episode & people freaked out. Holy double standard Batman! So it's alright to run things that are offensive to minorities but when they offend the majority then we should be shielded from this filth? Right?

The real question is does the media, or anyone for that matter, have the right to say things that could be deemed offensive? I mean, as I have said, the purpose of the media, or art, is to make you think, but have some people taken that privilege too far? The world is a pretty scary place these days, print one thing & it goes global on Google News ten minutes later. One slip and you can offend millions.

What is the answer? Should people harden up & realize it's the grown up world & you can't get offended by everything some Danish cartoonist does, or a couple of American satirists put on their show? Or should everything we say or print be censored into a cotton-wool padded children's show?

In many ways the train has already left the station. The double-edged sword that is the Internet has assured that one. Ask any 12 year old and you can find video of Muslims blowing themselves up and some live-action bleeding on line. Some people obviously haven't ventured too far beyond their Hotmail account, or they would have seen things that even the most jaded agree go way, way, way too far.

But maybe that's the heart of the whole issue, we should be allowed to say whatever we want, it should be our right, but that doesn't necessarily make it nice. Just like mum told me not to call big people fat, there has to be some sort of discretion. I mean the news is supposed to report the wars, not start them.

But therein lies the catch-22, if the media censors itself then the truth will be lost in the interest of political correctness. But if they choose to go ahead and say whatever they want, regardless of the consequences, then you risk offending millions of people.

The answers aren't easy or straightforward. But the questions can be just as interesting. Why were you offended? Why not? Why do you want censorship? Why free reign? Everyone's answers will be different – but the discussion that comes from them will ultimately bring us a whole lot closer to understanding each other.