

Not surprisingly, given its liberal attitudes, *Mladina* was also one of the few Slovenian publications to reprint the caricatures of Muhammad. And, conversely, those who displayed the greatest “understanding” for the violent Muslim protests those cartoons caused were also the ones who regularly expressed their concern for the fate of Christianity in Europe.

These weird alliances confront Europe’s Muslims with a difficult choice: The only political force that does not reduce them to second-class citizens and allows them the space to express their religious identity are the “godless” atheist liberals, while those closest to their religious social practice, their Christian mirror-image, are their greatest political enemies.

The paradox is that Muslims’ only real allies are not those who first published the caricatures for shock value, but those

who, in support of the ideal of freedom of expression, reprinted them.

While a true atheist has no need to bolster his own stance by provoking believers with blasphemy, he also refuses to reduce the problem of the Muhammad caricatures to one of the respect for others’ beliefs. Respect for others’ beliefs as the highest, value can mean only one of two things: Either we treat the other in a patronizing way and avoid hurting him in order not to ruin his illusions, or we adopt the relativist stance of multiple “regimes of truth,” disqualifying as violent imposition any clear insistence on truth. What about submitting Islam – together with all other religions – to a respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless, critical analysis? This, and only this, is the way to show a true respect for Muslims: to treat them as adults responsible for their beliefs. ■

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MEMORIES OF DETENTION

We sit in a room,
before the curfew,
and watch the road,
there is silence everywhere

There is a knock
on the weathered door,
and I meet the gaze of
my former acquaintance,
smile the warm welcome of
acceptance

We share a cup of tea,
and talk of the times,
gazing at photographs of
violence and counter-violence,
in that long and deserted
road.

Can this be possible?
I query.
All this violence,
on both sides,
one acquaintance more prone to violence,
abducted in a marketplace
after months of negotiation.

The silence of death
meets my gaze,
torpid in the festering
heat,
where were those trees,
totem poles of silence
to which the burnt out
remains of a man were
tethered?

I do not know?
I witness only the silent
suffering of one
who is trapped in a
world of death.

And what of my acquaintance?
The cups of coffee or tea we
shared at the canteen,
watching the canopied trees
and gurgling brook outside
the canteen are memories
distilled from the past.

I glance once more at the
distant hills and observe
images from the past.

Parvathi Solomons Arasanayagam