

Maintaining Vigilance Against Intolerance

There seems to be no shortage of those who feel religiously obligated to assist the Lord in the early demise and eternal damnation of all who don't believe as they do.



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I recently received an email cheering a Professor Indrek Wichman of Michigan State University for expressing a view held by a great many Americans. The email recounts how the Muslim Students Association at MSU passed out flyers protesting cartoons that portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. The group complained that the cartoons constituted hate speech. Professor Wichman responded with the following:

Dear Muslim Association,
As a professor of mechanical engineering here at MSU, I intend to protest your protest. I am offended not by cartoons, but by more mundane things like beheadings of civilians, cowardly attacks on public buildings, suicide murders, murders of Catholic priests, burnings of Christian churches, the continued persecution of Coptic Christians in Egypt, the imposition of Sharia law on non-Muslims, the rapes of Scandinavian girls and women (called "whores" in your culture), the murder of film directors in Holland and the rioting and looting in Paris, France. This is what offends me, a soft-spoken person and academic, and many, many of my colleagues.

I couldn't agree more. I'm not generally offended by cartoons either. Flag 'em if they can't take a joke. I wasn't offended by *South Park's* portrayal of Jesus in the "Jesus vs. Santa" episode. But I also wasn't offended by artist Cosimo Cavallaro's *My Sweet Lord*, which he sculpted out of 200 pounds of chocolate; or Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, depicting an African Madonna surrounded by female genitalia and little cherubim made from bits of elephant dung. Many Christians were, though. Cavallaro reaped the equivalent of a Catholic *fatwa*, and Rudy Giuliani was apoplectic over Ofili's painting, calling for boycotts and for funding to be cut from the museum that exhibited it. Ofili, who is Catholic, thought the painting was beautiful. No one seems to have had a problem with apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Lava Lamp at Harry's Burrito Palace on the Upper West Side.

In any case, my first thought was that Professor Wichman's list was truncated. Conspicuously missing was the killing and maiming of innocent people, including children, in the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma by Christian fundamentalists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. I'm also offended by the murder of Dr. George Tiller, by Jones Town, by death threats leveled against biology teachers by Creationists, the murder of gays in California by men who professed to be

acting on God's law, by the Salem Witch Trials, the Inquisition, the Crusades and the current ongoing attempts to impose Biblical law on non-Christians by fundamentalists who assert that America was founded as a Christian nation. It was not.

And it's worth taking a moment here to set the record straight. Among the Founding Fathers, George Washington, Patrick Henry, George Mason, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were not only *not* Christians, they were not even men of faith; they considered themselves deists and men of reason. Alexander Hamilton had little use for religion at all, and Jefferson's and Paine's critiques of Christianity would seem gratuitously inflammatory to quote them here. Suffice it to say that Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, foreseeing the danger of religious bigotry and intolerance, also authored the *Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom*, which specifically states: "The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."

The facts, however, have not dissuaded the fundamentalists. Gary North, founder of the Institute for Christian Economics, is undaunted: "[L]et's be blunt about it: We must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God."

They're getting America ready for the Rapture, when all the unconverted Jews and Muslims will be burned, the messiah will return, and true believers will be lifted out of their clothes and transported to heaven. And there seems to be no shortage of those who feel religiously obligated to assist the Lord in the early demise and eternal damnation of all who don't believe as they do. But there's also a larger group of us who enable a culture of bigotry with our silence or *soto voce* agreement.

Professor Wichman concluded his email with this:

I counsel you dissatisfied, aggressive, brutal and uncivilized slave-trading Muslims to be very aware of this as you proceed with your infantile "protests." If you do not like the values of the West, you are free to leave. I hope for God's sake that most of you choose that option. Please return to your ancestral homelands and build them up yourselves instead of troubling Americans. Cordially, I. S. Wichman, Professor of Mechanical Engineering.

Appended to the email was this note: "Send this to your friends. Tell them to keep passing it around until the whole country gets it. We are in a war." The whole country, no doubt, has seen it already, as the entire incident occurred in 2006 and has been kept alive since by the enthusiastic "amen" of those – including black folk – who apparently don't know that Professor Wichman is also the faculty adviser to the MSU chapter of the white supremacist group Young Americans for Freedom.