The Pope, the Prophet and the Internet

or, how the western media and the internet have combined to make religion the most badly reported and inflammatory topic in the news today. A paper given at the Journalism Education Association conference, Auckland, December 2006.

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Abstract: In the past 12 months, the media has reported on two major religious stories; the furore over the Danish cartoons and Pope Benedict XVI’s speech at Regensburg. Both were instances of what were relatively small incidents blown into global problems by the media and what we might call the anti-media of the internet. Although the stories originated in Europe and the majority of protests originated in the Middle East, their effect was felt as far afield as the Pacific. The way in which the stories were reported in western and Middle Eastern media demonstrated, on the one hand, an almost complete incomprehension by European media of Muslim outrage at the cartoons and, in the Middle East, an equal incomprehension of what the Pope had actually said. Both stories reflected poorly on the media’s ability to report accurately and objectively on religious matters. In an age when religion rather than politics is the driving force behind so much of what is happening, and especially at a time when the internet allows so much unmediated and uncontextualised material to influence people’s thinking, this is extraordinarily dangerous.

Intolerance of religion is not new and has long been a staple of newspapers and magazines. In 1808, the Anglican divine Sydney Smith wrote in the *Edinburgh Review*:

> “Wretchedness, melancholy, groans and sighs are the offerings which these unhappy men make to a Deity who has covered the earth with gay colours and scented it with rich perfume; and shown us, by the plan and order of his works, that he has given to man something better than a bare existence, and scattered over his creation a thousand superfluous joys, which are totally unnecessary to the mere support of life.”

He was, of course, referring to those miserable, subversive wretches, the Methodists, who were spreading their pernicious doctrines throughout the British Isles and upsetting the established religious order. Smith’s attacks on the Methodists had currency among the fashionable classes of Edinburgh and were reprinted elsewhere, but in reality they were confined to a fairly small circle. His criticisms were witty, cynical and based on a particularly practical view of Anglicanism (what he called “rational religion”) but they were meant to be read and discussed by a class of educated people. However, when *Punch* magazine railed against the Puseyites (also a favourite victim of Smith’s wit) it had a much larger audience and conveyed its message in cartoons that lampooned Catholics and Anglo-Catholics alike. Later in the 19th century the *Sydney Bulletin* used cartoons to mock what is saw as canting, po-faced Presbyterians. Such iconography is always powerful. It is easily understood, it is direct and it leaves little room for debate.

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2 Curiously, for a man of his age, Smith was reasonably tolerant of Catholics and thought that proselytizing to Hindus was a waste of time.
5 All of these cartoons – including the Danish cartoons – pale into insignificance beside the highly sophisticated and very nasty cartoons attacking Muslims, Catholics, Masons and ecumenical Protestants produced by the American Jack Chick. The Chick cartoons are worth a study in themselves. They can be found at [http://www.chick.com](http://www.chick.com)
It should not, therefore, have come as too much of a surprise that, in an age when the Middle East has been the centre of so much attention, the faith of the majority of its population should also be the subject of attack by cartoon. The furore over the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed exploded earlier this year in belated response to publication in September last year of series of cartoons originally published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*. The cartoons variously depicted the Prophet Mohammed as a terrorist and murderer, with the best known showing him wearing a bomb as a turban. The cartoons were later re-published in a Norwegian evangelical newsletter.

After they were first published a group of Danish imams approached the Danish courts, but were advised that there were no legal grounds for seeking redress. Subsequently, the imams traveled to the Middle East, taking with them a pamphlet in which they reproduced the newspaper cartoons.

It appears that at some stage three unrelated images which had been circulating on the internet and elsewhere, were added. The three additional images included a photograph of a man wearing a pig mask, a crudely drawn cartoon figure and a photograph of a man being sodomised by a dog. It appears that many people thought the additional images had been published by *Jyllands Posten* and that it was these which aroused the greatest ire.6

There were violent demonstrations in a number of Muslim countries and boycotts of Danish goods. In many cases the rioting was used as a cover for attacks on the United States, its allies and local governments. This was especially true in Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan, where extremists whipped up mobs in order to serve their own ends.

Not long after the controversy erupted, a lecturer at Zayed University’s Dubai campus in the United Arab Emirates showed the cartoons to her class. There are conflicting versions of why this happened and what happened in the next 48 hours. What is certain is that the incident became widely known almost immediately and that a series of SMS messages of varying accuracy were texted around the country. The woman was sacked, as was her supervisor. The story was widely covered by the UAE media and then picked up by international news agencies, including CNN and AFP. The latter ran an inflammatory story that appeared to be cobbled together from press releases from the Minister for Higher Education, Sheikh Nahayan, gossip and text messages.7

The AFP story concluded with a quote from “a mother,” who preferred to remain anonymous, to the effect that she had been on her way to the university’s Dubai campus to punish the woman because it was *halal* (condoned) to kill people who insult the Prophet.

Meanwhile, all Danish products, from butter to Lego, were taken off the shelves. Even Danish butter biscuits, which are actually made in England, vanished. Danish dairy products sell well here, their main rival being New Zealand’s Anchor brand. However,

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shortly after a number of New Zealand papers printed the cartoons, Anchor butter quietly vanished from the shelves.\textsuperscript{8}

The UAE press devoted many pages to the controversy, with daily reports in the early stages of violent and fatal clashes in Pakistan and elsewhere. However, it also carried calls from UAE officials for such demonstrations to end, saying they were counter-productive. The \textit{Gulf News} went so far as to carry an article from the editor of the \textit{Jyllands Posten} explaining his newspaper’s position. This was heralded as being a debate on the issue, but the next day the letters page was devoted entirely to correspondence attacking the Danes.\textsuperscript{9}

The response to the cartoons continues. Late last week an Iranian cleric issued a \textit{fatwa} (ruling) against an Azeri editor for publishing the cartoons and insulting Islam. The \textit{fatwa} calls for the editor to be murdered.\textsuperscript{10}

The violent and prolonged response has puzzled – and scared – many people in what is loosely (and, I would argue, erroneously) called the West. However, it is worth noting that the controversy has been truly global. The \textit{Fiji Post} published the cartoons, as did newspapers in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{11}

There is undoubtedly widespread ignorance and insensitivity towards Islam in Europe. I would argue that this stems from the attempts to marginalise Christianity that have been going on in Western Europe since the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and that disrespect for Islam is an inevitable outcome of this policy. If one cannot respect one’s own religious traditions, how can you respect somebody else’s?

For more than a century there has been a \textit{kulturkampf} in Western Europe, with religion of any kind derided and marginalized and philosophy reduced to cheap Sartre. The intellectual classes and the products of the \textit{ecoles superieure} enthusiastically report that Europe is “post-Christian,” and do not even bother to erect the ‘temples of reason’ that were flung up after 1788 in an attempt to provide a secular alternative to the church. Such contempt towards Christianity has, I would argue, been the reason why many Europeans were so bewildered by the Muslim response to the cartoons.

They no longer had an intellectual framework in which religion could be understood, much less respected. To them, the anger of the Muslim world was incomprehensible. In their defence, they fell back on secular arguments about freedom of expression and their right to criticise and satirise whatever they liked. To a Muslim world angered by whatever version of the cartoon controversy they had been given, such a defence was not just bewildering, but insulting.

An attendant aspect is the issue of shame and honour in Muslim culture. Prophet Mohammed is the most honored figure in Islam and to insult him is to insult the messenger of God. Such an insult brings shame upon Islam and the entire \textit{umma}

\textsuperscript{8} - ‘NZ newspapers spark criticism by publishing cartoons,’ in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, February 4, 2006.
\textsuperscript{9} ‘Professor and supervisor sacked,’ \textit{Gulf News}, February 9, 2006.
\textsuperscript{10} \url{http://news.bbc.co.uk}
\textsuperscript{11} Gopal, A., and Dhanjay, D., ‘Media Council, \textit{Daily Post} differ over cartoons,’ in \textit{Wansolwara}, April 2006. As a result of publishing the cartoons the \textit{Post} received a hoax bomb threat. Fiji’s two other dailies, the \textit{Times} and the \textit{Sun}, did not publish the cartoons.
(Muslim community). Shame has to be avenged in order to restore honour. A colleague of mine said of this situation: “Do not insult me and then ask for an intellectual discussion.”

To pretend that religion has gone from the world or that it does not play a central role in the lives of billions of people around the globe is not just arrogance, it is stupidity. To proclaim that Europe is ‘post-Christian’ is to invite the thought that the rest of the world must be equally secular and to invite disaster when one’s assumptions turn into the thoughtless indulgence of a few cartoons in a Danish newspaper.

Let us now consider in detail just why the cartoons were offensive. In the majority sunni tradition of Islam, it is forbidden to depict any of the Prophets. A strict interpretation of this rule makes it haram (forbidden) to depict any living thing, although this has often been relaxed to allow for the depiction of leaves or vines. In the minority shia tradition (as practiced in Iran) this sanction has not always been applied. There are many surviving examples of medieval shia art depicting Prophet Mohammed, sometimes showing his face and hands, but sometimes with only a blank space where his face would be. Some images of the Prophet also occur in manuscripts originating in Turkey during the Ottoman empire. (Since many of the Ottoman rulers drank alcohol and allowed European Muslims to eat bacon, they were hardly considered virtuous.)

In Iran today it is possible to buy paintings of the Prophet Mohammed as a boy, because of a fatwa that he was not then the Prophet. Now, consider: In St Joseph’s Catholic church in Abu Dhabi in the UAE (which is predominantly sunni), there is a large painting behind the altar which might, on this ruling, be interpreted as showing the young Issa (Jesus) being led through the desert by his father, St Joseph. If the thousands of Catholics who attend mass every week wish to interpret the painting as showing a mature Jesus guiding a child, then that is their business. Such Jesuitical hair splitting can produce a theology that tolerates everything or condemns the whole world to chaos.

The cartoon which is known to just about everybody is the one showing the Prophet Mohammed wearing a bomb in his turban. For the Jyllands Posten to deliberately link the Prophet with suicide bombings and terrorism was utterly inflammatory. It had nothing to do with freedom of speech.

The link between Islam and terrorism, or between any religion and violence carried out in its name, is a proper matter for debate. It is one that should occur. Indeed, Karen Armstrong has written an extremely good book, the Battle for God, which soberly considers the relationship between violence and fundamentalism in Islam, Christianity and Judaism. There is an equal need for a study of the frightening fringe dwellers of

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12 As with much of Islamic tradition, this injunction against graven images owes much to Mosaic law as laid down in the Old Testament, specifically Exodus 20:3-5 and Deuteronomy 5:6-10. In the Quran, Sura 21:51-71 can easily be interpreted as a condemnation of graven images per se, but might be interpreted more liberally to condemn only their worship, not their creation. There are schools of Islamic thought which contend that images can be halal depending on the use to which they are put, particularly if that use is educational.

http://www.alsunnah.ca/A%20Follow%20Up%20On%20The%20Derogatory%20Depiction%20Of%20God’s%20Messenger.htm

Hindu thought and of why successive Indian governments have, for example, failed to do anything about the destruction of the Ayodyah mosque.¹⁴

Now, what was the role of the internet in all of this? Firstly, it should be said that, although with a few exceptions, the cartoons were not printed in Arab countries, they were immediately and widely available on the internet.¹⁵ The internet turned the indulgence of a small town Danish newspaper into a global event. However, we cannot be sure what version of the cartoons were posted and by whom. There is, as I have said, evidence that additional cartoons were circulated that were not from *Jyllands Posten* and these were used to deliberately inflame Muslim sentiment. There is also evidence that a number of Muslim groups made the cartoons available. It also appears, however, that many people who did not have access to the net were told that they were there and then heard a third or fourth hand account of the matter.

The Iranian academic Howard Mowlama once described the Iranian media to me as a bazaar, or *souq*, in which rumour, innuendo and half truths are spread far more successfully than the official news and are believed far more readily precisely because they are not official.¹⁶

I think it can be safely said that much of the Middle East has a media bazaar culture. If you don’t trust the government-controlled media, then a story you hear in the market is bound to be more attractive. However, I think that Mowlama’s comments can apply equally to the internet, which has become something of a *souq* for many people, whether they are from the west or east, north or south. For them the internet has become a cyber *souq*, a sort of anti-media where unregulated, uncontextualised and often quite untrue stories are accepted, even welcomed, simply because they are not official.

And yet, the western media, which has such a large presence on the net through what should be carefully self-regulated news sites, are occasionally equally guilty of creating the same atmosphere of hysteria and ill-informed speculation through an unwillingness or rather an inability, to put a story into context or perspective.

The reporting by the BBC website on Pope Benedict XVI’s speech at Regensburg in September is a case in point. The story began with a speech by the Pope to a gathering of academics, theologians and other scholars at the University of Regensburg, where he and Hans Kung once taught.

The story as reported by the BBC was that in his speech Benedict had quoted a Byzantine emperor, Manuel Paleologus, as criticising Islam. That much was true. However, the Pope did not himself attack Islam. He described the emperor’s comments

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¹⁵ It is important to note that a small number of Arab editors decided to reprint the cartoons. In Jordan two editors who ran the cartoons were arrested for blasphemy. -, ‘Two editors arrested after reprinting Danish Cartoons,’ International Journalists’ Network, [http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P+Article&ID=304484&LID=1](http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P+Article&ID=304484&LID=1)

¹⁶ I discussed this with Mowlama during the second international conference on religion and the media in Edinburgh in July 1999. See also Mowlama, H., ‘Traditional Arab media.’ Paper given at a conference on the media in the Arab world at the Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, November 19, 1998.
as “brusque” and doubtless thought that would be enough to make his audience understand that he was distancing himself from the comments. Alas, a speech made to a gathering of scholars, who understand nuance, the fine distinctions of theological discussion and the historical background attached to such debate, is not the same as a global audience that reads the internet. It must be said that Benedict did not exercise the careful media management of his predecessor, John Paul II, who would have pallisaded the quote with disclaimers.

It is difficult to believe that either the Pope or his minders thought that an extremely complicated speech given to a room full of theologians would have been of any interest to the public. The speech was not posted on the Vatican website or previewed in L’Osservatore Romano on the day it was given.

On the day the furore broke, it took the BBC news website an hour or so to post a complete transcript, but by then it had also opened up its letters page and a steady stream of comments was pouring in. In the interest of balance and encouraging some semblance of rational debate, it would surely have been better to not have opened the ‘Have Your Say’ page without more information being available.

Most of the posts were from people who assumed that the comments were made by the Pope or that he endorsed them. A reading of the original transcript makes it clear that he did not, but this seems to have become the received wisdom. When the speech was eventually posted on the Holy See’s website it had been footnoted and a line inserted declaring that Benedict did not agree with the emperor’s statements, but by then it was rather too late.17 The edited version of the speech now reads:

‘..he addresses his interlocutor [a Persian] with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness than we now find unacceptable, on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find thing only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” ’18

It certainly is a harsh statement, but is clearly not the Pope’s own thoughts. However, that is how many people saw it. The London based Arabic newspaper Al Quds Al Arab commented:

“The Pope’s allegations were even more offensive than the anti-prophet cartoons because they came from a Christian religious authority who is supposed to have a high degree of knowledge and consciousness and preaches tolerance among religions...It is true that the Vatican hastened to clarify the statements saying these remarks were not intentional., and the Pope was only quoting the Byzantine emperor... However, the

18 ibid
clarification does not make the insult and harm less serious, nor does it lessen the Pope’s direct responsibility.”

Most of the reporting on the speech that I saw lacked any real historical context. Manuel Paleologus ruled at the end of the Byzantine empire and the circumstances surrounding its final days were incredibly complex. By the time the Ottomans launched their final assault on Byzantium, the Byzantine empire was about the size of Auckland and had been, to all intents and purposes, an Ottoman vassal state for a generation. The Byzantines had been fighting the Ottomans, the Bulgarians, the Serbs, the Albanians, the Genoese and the Venetians, all of whom wanted either independence or control of the Aegean for themselves. It would have been astonishing if the emperor had a kind word to say about the Ottomans or their religion. The Ottoman assault used European artillery and siege engines operated by Genoese (i.e Catholic) mercenaries. This was not just a battle between the Christian West and the Muslim East, but the last bitter squabble in an internecine feud between the western and eastern churches.

The other issue, which few media seem to have noticed, is that the collapse of the Byzantine empire was extremely significant for Catholic-Orthodox relations. With the collapse of Byzantium the centre of Orthodox power moved to Moscow. Had even a few journalists read a little history they might have noticed this and might have wondered whether the real importance of the Pope’s trip to Turkey this month was to discuss Turkish accession to Europe or whether it should be seen as part of the Vatican’s attempts to mend fences with the Orthodox churches. The media might also have noted that they were taking one quote out of a very long speech and ignoring the rest of it. Unfortunately, an intricate discussion of the role of the logos and rationality in religious belief proved too esoteric for most of the media. Once again the anti-media of the electronic bazaar was in full cry, this time aided and abetted by the BBC.

In the Middle East, reactions to the Pope’s speech were angry, but restrained. An Emirati colleague explained this by saying that the cartoon story was religious, while the Pope’s comments were seen as political. Religious fury could be unleashed, but political discussion had to be muted, especially since the Vatican has been seen as favouring the Palestinian cause ever since Pope John Paul II visited there.

When the Soviet empire collapsed, Francis Fukuyama famously and idiotically pronounced that history was at an end because from now on there would no more changes and that capitalism and democracy had triumphed. He was wrong, of course.

History has not ended, laissez-faire capitalism continues to harbour the seeds of its own destruction and George Bush Jnr successfully hijacked democracy in Florida.

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19 ‘‘Muslim press anger over Pope,’’ at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5351492.stm
20 There were many examples of reasoned and reasonable criticism by Muslim academics. One of the most significant Muslim responses, an open letter from 38 scholars representing all shades of Islamic opinion, can be found at http://www.islamicamagazine.com/online-analysis/open-letter-to-his-holiness-pope-benedict-xvi.html However, the reaction under consideration here is that of the ‘ordinary’ reader, not people skilled in scholarly debate or analysis.

Religion, on the other hand, has become an increasingly dominant force, not just in the Islamic world, but in other parts as well. In the United States fundamentalist Christians have gained so much power that scientists like Richard Dawkins have felt forced to declare that God is dead — again — and organise conferences at which concerned scientists are urged to take to the barricades to keep the fundamentalist hordes at bay.\textsuperscript{22} Now, some people might see Dawkins as being every bit as fanatical as his opponents and many would despair at the way in which religion and science in America have become so polarized, but others might wonder whether they should be frightened by the growing influence of fundamentalist Christians in the White House.\textsuperscript{23} This is the one religious story that nobody seems to want to touch. Extremist Christians have been conditioned to believe that we have reached the end times, the last days before the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall rise up incorruptible. Now, if you truly believed that, would you bother doing anything about global warming? Indeed, would you perhaps wonder if you might be better off hastening the Lord’s coming by pushing things along a little in the Middle East? If you search the internet you will find sites promoting the beliefs of similarly minded Muslims and Jews who believe that the end is nigh, some of whom also seem to think that it would be a good idea to hasten the world’s demise.

Now, if this sounds like the stuff of fantasy, it is — but then, it isn’t. These people are at the far edges of religion, a long way from the rational religion of Sydney Smith. They are out there in the cyber \textit{souq}, peddling all kinds of strange ideas. One site solemnly assures us that Pope Benedict will have a short reign and then be replaced by a demon disguised as a resurrected John Paul II. You may laugh at these sites and you may regard fundamentalists of any kind as cranks, but they believe. They believe more strongly than the average Christian or Muslim or Jew or Hindu or Buddhist ever will. Journalists don’t want to investigate people like this precisely because they are so extreme and because they are prone to conspiracy theories and convoluted interpretations of scripture which prove that white is black. The media has to take notice of them precisely because they are on the fringes. It is when their beliefs become mainstream that the rest of us have to worry.

So, is there a solution? For a start, the western media has to accept that to the majority of people on this planet, religion matters. They are people for whom religion is not something they do on Friday, or Saturday or Sunday, but something that pervades their lives every hour of every day. Many of these people look at the secularised, capitalist west with complete horror. They may not want to fight the west, but they may ask how a culture that has tried so hard to marginalise its own beliefs has any right to report or comment on theirs.\textsuperscript{24}

There are solutions and they are the usual ones: Education, tolerance and understanding. There has long been a Religion Newswriters’ Association in the United

\textsuperscript{24} Religion and the media hardly seems to have been a subject of debate at all among the antipodean groves of academe. A preliminary search of the \textit{Australian Journalism Review} files shows one issue devoted to the subject in 1988. \url{http://www.jea.org.au/journal/1988.htm}
States and since the terrorist attacks on New York there have been moves to offer journalists and journalism students a wider understanding of how to report on religion accurately and fairly.\textsuperscript{25} Columbia University in the United States now offers a joint MA in journalism and religion. Dean of Columbia’s School of General Studies Peter Awn said:

“The media is an expanding part of the conversation about faith, religion and spirituality. It’s in everyone’s best interests to have reporters and producers who are well-versed in the language of religion.”\textsuperscript{26}

On a global scale there are organisations such as the World Association for Christian Communication, which promote education about and through the media as a way of promoting social justice.\textsuperscript{27} In 2005 the International Center for Journalists in Washington included coverage of religion as a major topic for discussion in a workshop for Arab and American reporters.\textsuperscript{28} Earlier in 2006 the International Council for the Training of Journalists ran a workshop in Kuala Lumpur on journalism and religion.\textsuperscript{29} We all have a duty as educators to make sure that our future journalists are capable of reporting accurately and fairly on these matters. Equally, journalists have a duty to make sure that their readers and viewers know enough about these matters so that they do not go wandering off into the media bazaar because its lies are so much more beguiling than the truth.

\textsuperscript{25} See The RNA website at \url{http://www.rna.org/history.php}
\textsuperscript{26} Beshkin, A., ‘A joint master’s program in religion and journalism announced,’ \textit{Columbia News} at \url{http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/00/10/journalismAndReligion.html} There have been regular international academic conferences in the past decade on religion and the media in Edinburgh, Minneapolis and, most recently, Stockholm, but these have been organized by religious scholars and clergy interested in the media rather than by journalists interested in religion.
\textsuperscript{27} The WACC site is at \url{http://www.waccglobal.org}
\textsuperscript{29} -, ‘Malaysia to host international workshop on reporting religions,’ International Journalists’ Network at \url{http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Articles&iD=304701&LID=1}
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-, ‘Muslim press anger over Pope,’ at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5351492.stm

Books

Useful websites

• The edited version of the Pope’s speech, with footnotes and a disclaimer inserted before the quote from the Byzantine Emperor Micheal Paleologus. Benedict XVI, ‘Faith, reason and the University,’ lecture at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.
  http://vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents

• A sometimes hostile, but nevertheless comprehensive page about the cartoon issue and the depiction of the prophet Mohammed in Islam.
  http://www.zombietime.com/mohammed_image_archive/

• A site giving interpretations of various hadith (sayings of the Prophet) as signs of the end of the world.
  http://www.theprophetmuhammad.org/future1.html

• An American site promoting good relations between Muslims and mainstream America.
  http://www.cair-net.org

• An Islamic site giving an opinion on the sharia law regarding graven images. There are several schools of Islamic jurisprudence with different interpretations of sharia law.
  http://www.alsunnah.ca/A%20Follow%20Up%20On%20The%20Derogatory%20Depiction%20Of%20God's%20Messenger.htm


• A site promoting the publications of Jack Chick, an American fundamentalist who hates Muslims, Catholics and Freemasons, although not necessarily in that order. Chick cartoons are sophisticated and very, very, nasty.
  http://www.chick.com
And just to prove that sometimes the boot has been on the other foot when it comes to relations between religion and the media...