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Free Speech and Those Cartoons
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Newsflash: Chef quit.

After nine years as the gravelly voice of the character Chef on the cartoon show, "South Park," Isaac Hayes has left. "South Park" is known for its sophomoric satirizing of anyone and anything. In a statement Hayes said, "There is a place in this world for satire, but there is a time when satire ends and intolerance and bigotry toward religious beliefs of others begins. Religious beliefs are sacred to people, and at all times should be respected and honored ... I cannot support a show that disrespects those beliefs and practices."

Say what?

My incredulity is best expressed by "South Park" co-creator Matt Stone. "In 10 years and more than 150 episodes, Isaac never had a problem with the show making fun of Christians, Muslims, Mormons or Jews. He got a sudden case of religious sensitivity when it was his religion featured on the show." Stone points out that a show last November ridiculed Scientology. Hayes is a Scientologist.

Stone's point is that for years Hayes felt free to poke fun at everyone else's religion, but he was upset when his own beliefs were criticized. Rather than admit his narrow self-interest, Hayes made a general statement about respecting all religions -- even though he had participated in those critiques.

In light of last month's world-wide uproar over the Danish cartoons lampooning Muhammad, this comparatively unimportant incident provides a simpler parallel that can be used to understand the principle underlying both.

Denmark has a growing population of Muslim immigrants, which increasingly causes changes to Danish culture and society. Disliking the climate of "political correctness" this was bringing to journalism, a Danish newspaper decided to strike a blow for free speech by publishing cartoons criticizing Islam. Some of these cartoons used the figure of Muhammad, Islam's central prophet, in an insulting manner. This led to weeks of protests and riots by Muslims around the world, for Muslims believe that Muhammad should never be depicted. To create an insulting picture was even worse.

What started as a minor point about civil discourse became a rallying cry for the Western media; papers in many countries reprinted the cartoons. "Freedom of speech!" became a rallying cry, like a cheer at a sporting match to get the "fans" excited. Muslims had their own cry, "Respect Muhammad! Respect our religion!" and demanded apologies. It became a shouting match. At times it seemed that whichever side made the most fuss would "win."

The sporting analogy is apt, I think, because the two sides were actually in a contest. Although the Western press presented the clash mainly as one-sided, portraying free speech as a moral value vastly more important than respect for the founder of a religion, it was for both sides a game of "don't criticize my sacred cows."

Each side had its own belief which it held as inviolate and sacred. The Muslims believed in the reverence of Muhammad. The Western press believed in the freedom of speech. When the other side criticized that belief in a way that could not be ignored, each side responded with indignation, horror and outrage. They pointed to the criticism as an indication of what was wrong with the other side. In the end, neither side had any moral superiority (or inferiority) vis-a-vis the other. Both sides simply shouted about their own core beliefs, like fans at a football game.

Returning to "South Park," Isaac Hayes was happy to criticize religious beliefs until his own came under attack. Similarly, the Western press and the Muslims attacked each others' core beliefs and found that the other side did not like those beliefs criticized. All found that it is easy to denigrate or make fun of things in which one does not believe, but that it is not so easy to have one's own beliefs ridiculed.

Perhaps the best rule here is the Golden Rule, do to others as you would have them do to you. The formulation of Hillel, an ancient Jewish rabbi may fit better, do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. If you do not want to have your core beliefs criticized, then do not criticize those of other people. This may sound trite and old fashioned, but it is a rule that will help ease matters as we enter into the new global age, an age in which the Internet, fast transportation, and cheap phone communication bring the multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world to our doorstep.