

Religion Today
April 22-28, 2007
February 2006: Europe's "Imus Moment"
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A new term was coined last week, namely, "Imus moment," as in "You've just had an 'Imus moment.'" It refers to a comment that someone utters, usually thoughtlessly, which viciously insults members of a social sub-class, often ethnic or religious.

These utterances receive different responses. Some Imus moments go unnoticed or unheard by members of the insulted group, while some are heard but pass unremarked even though hearers may be upset. A full-blown Imus moment occurs when the hurtful remarks are protested by increasingly large numbers of people and result in serious consequences for the speaker, as media star Don Imus learned to his cost.

Societies, nations, and even continents can have their own Imus moments. A year ago February, Europe and the Arab world was convulsed over cartoons published by a Danish newspaper insulting Muhammad, the founder of Islam. When protestors demanded an apology, the paper refused and sounded the cry of freedom of speech. Other European papers echoed the cry, reprinting the cartoons themselves. Muslims around the world erupted in outrage, with protests continuing for weeks. Most came off peacefully, although a few became violent with attacks on embassies and casualties among the protesters.

At the time, many commentators in the West were puzzled by the massive response to the cartoons. Not only was "freedom of speech" held up as an important value, but many observed that most social groups found themselves offended by something in the media at some time. Everyone could be insulted; Muslims were not being singled out. Westerners could not understand why this one insult caused such a ruckus.

It was Europe's Imus moment. To understand what that means, let's start with a look at the key elements of the Imus debacle.

Don Imus, radio star of CBS's "Imus in the Morning" (a show simulcast on MSNBC), is (was) a shock jock. After Rutgers' women's basketball team competed for the NCAA championship, he used ghetto slang to call them whores. Many people, whites as well as black, protested this remark. Imus apologized. Several times. In several ways. The apologies revealed, however, that he just didn't get it. The protests continued and eventually both MSNBC and CBS cancelled the program.

Imus and his employers were puzzled by the response. After all, he made his living by insulting people. Over the last two decades, he has made offensive remarks about Hispanics and Blacks, Jews and Catholics, Evangelicals and women, to name just a few. Despite this, he has been lauded by the media and politicians; Time magazine in 1997 even ranked him as one of the 25 most influential people in the United States. His show had a strong audience and was a big money maker.

What Imus' comment about the women's basketball team and the Danish Muhammad cartoons have in common is that the insults were over the line. After Imus' history of insults, implying that these accomplished basketball players were only good on their backs was too much for an African-American community that has endured white degradation since slavery.

Similarly, publishing cartoons insulting Islam's founder was too much for Muslims. When the paper refused to apologize and other European papers compounded the situation, this was the final straw in a history of insults extending for centuries. It was more extreme than the Imus event because the perpetrators did not apologize (with a few exceptions, France Soir newspaper being the most prominent); instead they trumpeted their actions as righteous.

In both cases, the insults occurred in big-money media outlets, radio and TV for Imus and major newspapers for the cartoons. These establishment sources of culture lent a legitimacy to the insults that fanned the flames of anger. The differences, again, stem from the fact that in the Imus case, the media backed down and in the cartoon case they did not.

Why the different responses? Because African-Americans are more integrated into American society and business, especially the media business, than Muslims are in Europe. Both NBC and CBS made it clear that their own employees, many of whom are black and some of whom are executives, did not think Imus represented the company well. By contrast, few Muslims have influential voices in European society and in the media companies. Indeed, many Europeans view Muslims as outsiders and hence not requiring the same engagement and respect. It was this lack of engagement that caused the wider scale of the protests.