

The Nation

NYU on Mohammed Cartoons: Discuss, but Don't Look

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(CNSNews.com) - New York University administrators on March 29 banned the display of cartoons satirizing the Muslim prophet Mohammed but did so during a forum held to discuss the controversy over the cartoons. As a result, the president of a free speech advocacy group calls the decision to censor the cartoons "one of the most frustrating" arguments he has ever heard.

Leaders of the university's Objectivist Club organized the forum to discuss the Danish cartoons that had depicted Mohammed, for example, with a fuse in his turban. The cartoons offended Muslims because Islam forbids any depictions of the prophet, and deadly protests ensued in Europe and all over the Arab world.

Robert Butler, director of student activities at New York University (NYU), sent an e-mail to the Objectivist Club organizers, warning that the school would only allow "members of the NYU community to attend the forum." In a later e-mail, Butler clarified that students would be able to allow outside attendees "if the cartoons aren't being displayed."

The forum went on as planned, but without the cartoons. Instead, students displayed blank easels on which the cartoons would have been propped.

An NYU spokesman declined to discuss the event with **Cybercast News Service**, but in his e-mail to the Objectivist Club, Butler stated that he made the decision "after consulting with Jules Martin (the university's vice president for public safety) and Pamela Bolen (of the Kimmel Center for University Life) regarding the campus climate and controversy surrounding the cartoons."

Muslim groups from as far away as Britain had engaged in an e-mail campaign to urge the university to ban the cartoons. A blogger from the England-based Muslim Action Committee had also encouraged his readers to e-mail Butler and university President John Sexton to support removing the cartoons from the event.

But Greg Lukianoff, president of the free speech advocacy group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said the decision to ban the cartoons was wrong. The university's position that students could discuss the cartoons without seeing them was "one of the most frustrating and asinine arguments that I've heard," Lukianoff said.

"If you can so easily convey the meaning or point of an editorial cartoon in a couple sentences, then the cartoonist should have just written the sentences," he added.

Lukianoff said people should want and be allowed to see the cartoons before discussing them. "If you have the opportunity to look at an image that people are dying over and see for yourself what the fuss is about," he said, "I think that you should be allowed to see it, particularly if you're trying to have an open discussion about

something."

Lukianoff, who attended the event, characterized it as "tense but not stifled." He said panelists did not hold back during the discussion and that students seemed free to express their opinions on the cartoons.

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