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Op-Ed Columnist

Drafting Hitler

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You want us to know how you feel. You in the Arab European League published a cartoon of Hitler in bed with Anne Frank so we in the West would understand how offended you were by those Danish cartoons. You at the Iranian newspaper Hamshahri are holding a Holocaust cartoon contest so we'll also know how you feel.

Well, I saw the Hitler-Anne Frank cartoon: the two have just had sex and Hitler says to her, "Write this one in your diary, Anne." But I still don't know how you feel. I still don't feel as if I should burn embassies or behead people or call on God or bin Laden to exterminate my foes. I still don't feel your rage. I don't feel threatened by a sophomoric cartoon, even one as tasteless as that one.

At first I sympathized with your anger at the Danish cartoons because it's impolite to trample on other people's religious symbols. But as the rage spread and the issue grew more cosmic, many of us in the West were reminded of how vast the chasm is between you and us. There was more talk than ever about a clash of civilizations. We don't just have different ideas; we have a different relationship to ideas.

We in the West were born into a world that reflects the legacy of Socrates and the agora. In our world, images, statistics and arguments swarm around from all directions. There are movies and blogs, books and sermons. There's the profound and the vulgar, the high and the low.

In our world we spend our time sifting and measuring, throwing away the dumb and offensive, e-mailing the smart and the incisive. We aim, in Michael Oakeshott's words, to live amid the conversation — "an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all."

We believe in progress and in personal growth. By swimming in this flurry of perspectives, by facing unpleasant facts, we try to come closer and closer to understanding.

But you have a different way. When I say you, I don't mean you Muslims. I don't mean you genuine Islamic scholars and learners. I mean you Islamists. I mean you young men who were well educated in the West, but who have retreated in disgust from the inconclusiveness and chaos of our conversation. You've retreated from the agora into an exaggerated version of Muslim purity.

You frame the contrast between your world and our world more bluntly than we outsiders would ever dare to. In London the protesters held signs reading "Freedom Go to Hell," "Exterminate Those Who Mock Islam," "Be Prepared for the Real Holocaust" and "Europe You Will Pay, Your 9/11 Is on the Way." In Copenhagen, an imam declared, "In the West, freedom of speech is sacred; to us, the prophet is sacred" — as if the two were necessarily opposed.

Our mind-set is progressive and rational. Your mind-set is pre-Enlightenment and mythological. In your worldview, history doesn't move forward through gradual understanding. In your worldview, history is resolved during the apocalyptic conflict between the supernaturally pure jihadist and the supernaturally evil Jew.

You seize on any shred — even a months-old cartoon from an obscure Danish paper — to prove to yourself that the Jew and the crusader are on the offensive, that the apocalyptic confrontation is at hand. You invent primitive stories — like the one about Jews who kill children for their blood — to reinforce your image of Jewish evil. You deny the Holocaust because if the Jews were as powerful as you say, they would never have allowed it to happen.

In my world, people search for truth in their own diverse ways. In your world, the faithful and the infidel battle for survival, and words and ideas and cartoons are nothing more than weapons in that war.

So, of course, what started in Denmark ended up for you with Hitler, the Holocaust and the Jew. But in your overreaction this past week, your defensiveness is showing. Democracy is coming to your region, and democracy brings the conversation. Mainstream leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani are embracing democracy and denouncing your riots as "misguided and oppressive."

You fundamentalists have turned yourselves into a superpower of dysfunction, demanding our attention week after week. But it is hard to intimidate people forever into silence, to bottle up the conversation, to lock the world into an epic war only you want. While I don't share your rage, I do understand your panic.