

# A QUESTION OF HONOUR

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In 2005, a Danish newspaper published a series of satirical cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Mohammed. For Muslims, depictions of Mohammed are considered sacrosanct. And in some contexts, even the writing of his name can be seen as blasphemous. Muslims across Europe staged protests that turned violent.

More than 100 people were killed in these riots.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, more than 50 countries around the world reprinted the Danish cartoons.<sup>2</sup> Some of those reprints were accompanied by denouncements of the cartoons while others supported them on grounds of freedom of speech. But the *Western Standard* was the only mainstream publication in Canada to reprint the drawings--and in doing so the *Standard* became the subject of media scrutiny.

What's more, various Islamic groups filed human rights complaints against the *Standard's* publisher, Ezra Levant. (However, all of the complaints filed against him were eventually dismissed.)<sup>3</sup>

Levant was incredulous: "The cartoons were the central artifact in the largest news story of the month."

HOW COULD ANY SELF-RESPECTING "NEWS" OUTLET--OTHER THAN RADIO STATIONS THAT ARE FORCED TO PAINT PICTURES WITH WORDS--NOT DISPLAY THEM? IT WASN'T FOR US TO ANSWER WHY WE PUBLISHED THEM, IT WAS FOR THE REST OF THE MEDIA TO ANSWER WHY THEY DID NOT.<sup>4</sup>

A national survey by *Compass* found that 7 in 10 Canadian journalists believed the cartoons should have been published in the mainstream media.<sup>5</sup>

So why didn't the cartoons appear in major Canadian media outlets? Survey respondents listed fear of backlash, cultural respect and bias as some of the reasons for self-censorship. Ironically, the Danish cartoons were meant to be a commentary on media self-censorship in matters concerning Islam.

Long before the cartoon riots, a wave of violent attacks had seemingly caused a chill effect in Europe.

One of the most high profile incidents involved controversial artist Theo van Gough, great-great-grand-nephew of the famed artist Vincent van Gough. In 2004 van Gough was assassinated for making a film that scrutinized Islam's treatment of women.<sup>6</sup>

In Canada, no such violence has occurred. And yet, the Canadian media is cautious in its handling of issues regarding Islam. But, not because the media is afraid of attacks from the Muslim community, but rather, attacks against it.

During Canada's reasonable accommodation hearings, Hérouxville, a small town in Quebec, infamously passed a law banning stonings.<sup>7</sup> The town had evidently perceived the recent influx of Muslim immigrants as a threat to their values and way of life. The incident became the quintessential example of Islamophobia in Canada.

But what's more troubling is that Canadian journalists regard themselves as stalwarts of multiculturalism, rather than objective observers. And while promoting such an agenda is fine when shining light on matters that are peripheral to the day's news, such an agenda becomes dangerous when it shapes and colours coverage of unfolding stories.

In an attempt to appear balanced, members of the Canadian media have confused sympathy with fairness--causing irrevocable harm to the very people they are trying to protect while betraying their responsibilities as journalists.

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On December 10, 2007, 16-year-old Aqsa Parvez was allegedly strangled to death over a dispute concerning her refusal to wear a hijab. Parvez's brother, 26-year-old Waqas Parvez, and father, 57-year-old Mohammed Parvez, were both charged with first-degree murder.<sup>8 9</sup>

The international media and human rights groups plainly reported on the teenager's death an "honour killing."

Every year, thousands of women and men, around the world, are killed in order to preserve some nebulous notion of honour--and thousands more are kidnapped, forced into marriage, and maimed. The perpetrators of these "honour crimes" are usually related to their victims. And the decision to commit such an act is often a family affair.<sup>10 11</sup>

A person can become the target of an honour crime after committing some perceived infraction against cultural norms--wearing clothing that is deemed inappropriate, rejecting an arranged marriage, or even being the victim of rape can be seen as dishonorable.

Honour crimes are not the product of any particular religion or culture. But the practice is commonly found in patriarchal societies.

Parvez's death appeared to be a textbook example of an honour crime.

But Canadian Muslim leaders denied there's any such thing. Instead, they wanted the Canadian media to ignore the cultural overtones in Parvez's death and broaden the context of her story as a domestic violence issue—a crime of passion.<sup>12</sup> But remember, Parvez's brother and father were both charged with 1st-degree murder—which is, by definition, a premeditated act. What's more, their allegedly shared involvement in Parvez's death is consistent with the modus operandi of honour killing.

*Toronto Life* was one of the few mainstream Canadian publications to raise the question of honour in Parvez's death.<sup>13</sup> The magazine and the article's author, Mary Rogen, were immediately accused of Islamophobia.<sup>14</sup> Rogen was unapologetic:

"IF THREE WHITE GUYS GRAB A BLACK MAN AND PUT A ROPE AROUND HIS NECK AND HANG HIM FROM A TREE, WE KNOW WHAT THAT IS. WE HAVE WORDS LIKE 'LYNCHING.' IT'S POWERFUL. IT'S EVOCATIVE. IT'S SPECIFIC. TO BE SPECIFIC IS NOT RACIST."<sup>15</sup>

Yes, Parvez's death was an act of domestic violence. But that label is too broad and vague to have any real world application or meaning. Honour crimes have a distinct and clearly defined pathology that is wholly different from any other type of domestic violence. But acknowledging this simple fact does not condemn an entire race or culture. (Obviously, victims of honour crimes, don't condone violence; nor do the activists and concerned citizens who speak out against such violence within their communities.) Instead, viewing crime through a cultural lens can provide some much needed context.

In Canada, gang violence is a problem that affects a disproportionate number of black youths (in Toronto) and Aboriginals (in Winnipeg). Community leaders, in their respective communities, plainly acknowledge the very obvious cultural context in these issues. And the media follows suit, engaging the public in debate, in an attempt to find solutions.

Context is everything.

To squabble about semantics and rhetoric is nothing more than an exercise in political correctness and whitewashing.

The United Nations plainly recognizes honour crime as a disturbing international problem. African, European, South Asian, and Middle Eastern nations plainly label honour crimes for what they are. And there are numerous organizations that are specifically dedicated to tackling this singular, supposedly non-existent, issue.

However, it's understandable that Islamic leaders would attempt to obfuscate the issues at hand in order to protect their interests. What's inexcusable is that the mainstream Canadian media dutifully parrots the language of PR officials and spin-doctors rather than serve the interests of the public at large.

Shortly after Parvez's story broke, the Canadian media congratulated itself for its self-censorship.

The *Ryerson Review of Journalism* praised the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for its "great lengths not to portray Parvez's murder as a "Muslim issue.""<sup>16</sup>

And in *Mediascout's* précis of the day's headlines author Daniel Casey singled out Montreal's *La Presse* for its role in "averting controversy."<sup>17</sup> But really, it is the *Toronto Star* that stood out from the pack. The *Star* didn't just merely censor itself, rather, it served as a mouthpiece for Islamic leaders while ignoring those from the Muslim community who believed Parvez's death needed to be scrutinized in a cultural context.

In an editorial titled, "No place for 'culture of silence,'" the *Star* declared:

THE CENTRAL ISSUE IN THIS HORRIBLE INCIDENT IS NOT A YOUNG GIRL'S ATTEMPT TO ASSIMILATE INTO WESTERN CULTURE, BUT HOW VIOLENCE TOWARDS WOMEN REMAINS HIDDEN IN HOMES ACROSS THE GTA.<sup>18</sup>

But honour crime can't be neatly reclassified as a women's violence issue since men are also the victims of such crimes aswell.

Regardless, within the same editorial, the *Star* went on to contradict itself

HOW MANY MORE DEATHS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN AT THE HANDS OF THEIR PARTNERS OR PARENTS MUST THERE BE BEFORE THERE IS REAL OUTRAGE IN THE COMMUNITY, ESPECIALLY IN THE SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITY, TO END THIS MADNESS?

*Especially* the South Asian community?

FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN TORONTO, THE PIVOTAL PROBLEM WE ARE FACING IS THE LOSS OF MANY YOUNG MEN TO GANGS AND STREET VIOLENCE. IN THE SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITY, THE PIVOTAL PROBLEM IS THAT WE ARE LOSING OUR WOMEN TO A CULTURE OF SILENCE THAT IS PSYCHOLOGICALLY DAMAGING THEM, AND IN THE WORST CASES KILLING THEM."

Here, the *Star* relates the problem of domestic violence in the South Asian community to the problem of gang violence in the black community. Nobody would ever try to whitewash gang violence as a nondenominational issue free of

any cultural context. Yet, that is precisely what the *Star* was attempting to do with the “pivotal” issue of domestic violence in the South Asian community.

(In additional articles on Parvez, the *Star* also managed to somehow admonish the government for a lack social services to “ease the path of immigrant parents” while simultaneously suggesting that the teenager’s death had no cultural context.”)<sup>19</sup>

The *Star*’s schizophrenic editorial stance was symptomatic of the untenable position they were trying to maintain: they wanted to address a problem while denying its existence. And this misguided effort was made even more evident in a series of one-sided profiles on hijab and choice. (Note: the following articles were filed under the *Star*’s “news” section.)

“*Why I wear a hijab ... and I don’t*” profiled two Muslim girls: one who chooses to wear a hijab and another who chooses not to wear one.<sup>20</sup>

“*Hijab can divide families*” profiled women who choose to wear a hijab *despite* their parent’s wishes.<sup>21</sup>

And “*Choosing hijab doesn’t make me more pious*” was a personal essay by a *Star* reporter exploring her decision to wear a hijab even though she doesn’t think it’s really required of her.<sup>22</sup>

Yes, not all Muslim women in Canada are oppressed. And yes, many Muslim women can choose to wear a hijab of their own accord. But what about Muslim women who have no choice? What about women who are abused and killed out of some dubious notion of cultural honour?

In 2006, Adi Abdul Humad asked the Supreme Court of Canada to be lenient in his sentencing for the murder of his wife--whom he believed to be having an extramarital affair. Humad cited “family honour” as a justification for stabbing his wife to death using a steak knife.<sup>23</sup>

A year earlier, Rajinder Atwal was convicted for the murder of his 17-year-old daughter. Atwal stabbed his daughter, Amandeep, 11 times because he disapproved of her Christian boyfriend.<sup>24</sup>

And in 2000, Jassi Sidhu was murdered by contract killers allegedly hired by her parents because they did not approve of her husband. The couple has not been charged or extradited despite pressure from Indian authorities.<sup>25 26</sup>

The media treated each of these incidents as if they were unique and isolated events. And every time someone is murdered for honour, pundits and bloggers

decry “there is no honour crime in Canada” while simultaneously arguing there’s no such thing.

In 2002, Britain had a widely publicized honour crime that mirrored the murder of Aqsa Parvez.

Abdalla Yones slit the throat of his 16-year old daughter, Heshu, because he disapproved of her Christian boyfriend and her Western clothing.<sup>27</sup>

Prompted by Yones’ death, the Scotland Yard re-examined more than 100 suspicious deaths in recent years, including suicides. And the British media facilitated a dialogue on the question of multiculturalism and moral relativism.

The British Broadcasting Corporation provided reams of text on its website exploring the issue of honour crimes. And in one damning poll, the BBC found that 1 in 10 British Asians believe that honour killings could be justifiable.<sup>28</sup>

It is estimated that at least a dozen honour killings occur annually in the U.K.—with more than 17,000 incidents of honour crime overall.

Ultimately, Yones’ death served as the impetus for the creation of the Forced Marriage Unit and other initiatives designed to combat the various facets of honour crime.

In 2006, the Department of Justice Canada commissioned a report on forced marriage.<sup>29</sup> The report cited the U.K.’s initiatives as a model for setting Canadian policy

...DUE TO THE SIMILARITIES AND CLOSE TIES BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES, AS WELL AS THE DEPTH TO WHICH THE UK HAS GONE IN INVESTIGATING THE ISSUE.

However,

SINCE THERE IS VERY LITTLE INFORMATION ABOUT FORCED MARRIAGE IN CANADA, IT IS DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE WHAT STEPS THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD TAKE TO TACKLE THE PRACTICE.

But in matters concerning culture clash, Canada’s problem isn’t so much a *lack* of information, but rather, a failure to *report* information.

When 18 Muslim Canadians were arrested for their alleged plans to behead the prime minister and blow up various landmarks, the *Star* reported “it is difficult to find a common denominator” among these men.<sup>30</sup>

Shortly after the story broke, Environics conducted a survey that found 12% of Muslim Canadians believed the alleged terrorist plot was justified. Based on this survey, the CBC ran a web story with the headline: “*Glad to be Canadian, Muslims say*”<sup>31</sup>--omitting the one troubling statistic from the poll. And other Canadian media outlets ran similarly sanitized stories. Evidently, the only mentioning of this disturbing statistic was made during CBC Television’s nightly newscast, *The National*.<sup>32</sup>

During the broadcast, sociology professor Haideh Moghissi went unchallenged when she said, “It’s really negligible that 12 percent feel that the attacks would be justified. I don’t think it even warrants attention.”

If a survey had found that 1 in 8 white Canadians are supportive of violence against Muslims, it’s difficult to believe anyone would argue that number is negligible.

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Islamophobia was fuelled, not suppressed, by censoring images that left the public guessing about the cause of riots that left more than a hundred people dead.

Ignoring a poll that found 12% of Muslims support terrorism will only allow more terrorist groups to breed freely without interference.

And Aqsa Parvez, along with many other Canadian girls, died in vain because of whitewashing and political correctness. How many young girls in Canadian homes fear for their safety because of family honour? We’ll never know because the Canadian media won’t let us know—they’re afraid our outrage might offend someone.

The Brits, however, have some answers for their own affairs. Their media asked difficult and uncomfortable questions and the answers they found proved to be damning. But really, they had no choice. It’s their job.

It is not a journalist’s duty to take “great lengths” to portray a story as one thing or another. Nor is it the media’s responsibility to avert “controversy.” A healthy democracy relies on the media to report on the news dispassionately so citizens can reach their own conclusions.

Feelings should not be a factor in the litmus test of truth. Niceties have no place in the business of journalism. And efforts to make the news more palatable only produces pabulum.

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