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Mohammed cartoon backlash hits Century College

A display of the controversial cartoons was taken down at Century College after Muslim students protested.

Tom Ford, Star Tribune

Last update: February 10, 2006 – 3:44 PM



The worldwide controversy regarding caricatures of the prophet Mohammed has reached White Bear Lake, though thus far with nonviolent results.

Dozens of Muslim students at Century College -- a two-year community college -- protested to administrators this week about a display of the infamous caricatures, first published in a Danish newspaper, on a campus bulletin board.

Karen Murdock, a part-time geography and earth science instructor who posted the cartoons -- surrounded by news articles about the topic and blank "comment" sheets -- said she simply wanted to spark discussion by allowing others to see the cartoons first-hand.

But the postings, first displayed Tuesday afternoon, were torn down at least once.

By Thursday, a senior faculty member instructed her to keep the cartoons off the social and behavioral sciences bulletin board, Murdock said. "I thought this might be controversial, but I didn't

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think it would be quite this controversial," she said.

Still, she stands by her decision to display the cartoons, and she questions the directive to keep them out of public view. "I don't think it's [a college's] job to make people comfortable," said Murdock, saying there is rather a duty to challenge students, even if at times it offends people.

Administrators hope that a forum being arranged by many Muslim students and faculty members next week in light of the postings will help quell any hard feelings on campus.

The forum is meant to increase understanding of Muslim culture, said Mike Bruner, vice president of student affairs. "When students come to me who are hurt, it signals to me we're off course somewhere," he said.

Several students said that they still feel welcome on campus, but that they were dismayed as to why someone would put the cartoons on display, given how provocative they have been after being published in European newspapers, said Herbert King, director of the campus' multicultural center.

Whether or how the cartoons could be displayed might be resolved as part of the forum; officials want to leave that up to faculty and students.

A similar forum will be held at the University of Minnesota next week.

It was not prompted by any display on campus, but rather is being organized as a proactive measure before any incidents arise, said Abdulaziz al-Salim, who is with the campus' Muslim Student Association. He said the goal of the forum is to teach others about the life of Mohammed and how violent portrayals of him go against his devotion to peace and justice.

He commended students at Century and his classmates for choosing dialogue and peaceful forms of protest over violence.

"We are to follow the laws of the land we live in," he said.

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