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EXPLAINER

**Graven Images 101**

Does Islam really prohibit images of religious figures?

By Daniel Engber  
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Outrage over a series of Danish cartoons that depict the Prophet Mohammed continues to spread throughout the Muslim world. On Tuesday, protesters [attacked a NATO base](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=1590377&page=1) in Afghanistan; in Pakistan, demonstrators chanted, "Hang the man who insulted the prophet." Many news reports claim that the cartoons [violate a Muslim stricture](http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L07619190.htm) against the depiction of the prophet. Does Islam really prohibit images of religious figures?

[Not all Islamic traditions](http://www.crankyprofessor.com/archives/000492.html) ban images of Mohammed, and some are pretty lax about pictures of lesser figures. For Muslims, the rule against depicting God and the prophets comes from the [Hadith](http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/searchhadith.html), a collection of sayings and actions attributed to Mohammed. (A few [passages in the Quran](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4674864.stm) have been taken to offer oblique support to this notion.) The doctrine has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. Persian art of the 15th and 16th centuries shows the figure of Mohammed with his face, hands, and feet covered. Some earlier Persian works show full views.

Arab Muslims tend to be the strictest about religious imagery. Shiites are more flexible than Sunnis; for example, they display images of Husayn,[\*](http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2135670#a) the grandson of Mohammed. Devotional portraits of leading teachers are generally OK, as long as they don't fall under the Hadith ban on depicting the major prophets. Pictures of people in religious scenes—like pilgrims on the Hajj—are also allowed. These are more likely to be displayed in the home than at a mosque, and some conservative Muslims will refuse to pray in their presence.

Muslims are more or less unanimous on the subject of Allah—he can't be drawn under any circumstances. The prohibition on depicting God extends throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Second Commandment instructs the faithful not to make "[any graven image](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=KjvExod.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=20&division=div1), or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." Jews have for the most part avoided visual representations of the deity, although there's been a great deal of Jewish figurative art throughout history. (Some Reform synagogues have stained-glass windows depicting figures from the Old Testament. More conservative Jews won't even [write down](http://www.jewfaq.org/name.htm) the word "God.")

Christian attitudes vary widely. The Orthodox Church uses religious icons for worship: Since God became embodied in Jesus, you can represent Jesus and other holy figures. You can't draw a picture of the Lord above, though. Catholicism assigns religious imagery a more pedagogical role, interpreting the Bible to say that religious images are allowed as long as you don't worship them. That's why you'll find that [white-bearded fellow](http://www.cedcc.psu.edu/khanjan/europe_images/014_creation%20of%20man%20-%20sistine%20chapel,%20vatican%20city.jpg) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Some Protestant traditions—like Calvinism—banned images outright. Today, you won't find much imagery in Baptist churches. Lutherans and Anglicans tend to be more accepting of religious images, believing that a picture can be used to teach an idea as long as it's not being worshipped.

Many Eastern religions make liberal use of imagery—pictures of the Buddha and of Hindu gods are particularly widespread. Some historians theorize that early Buddhists banned religious imagery: You can find ancient art that uses symbols—like a tree, a wheel, or a footprint—where a picture of the Buddha would normally go. Sikhism, which merges elements of Islam and Hinduism, prohibits the depiction of God. Sikhs do allow images of their most important [spiritual figures](http://www.sikhs.org/10gurus.htm) for inspiration.

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](mailto:ask_the_explainer@yahoo.com).

*Explainer thanks Charles Barber of the University of Notre Dame, David Morgan of Valparaiso University, and Robert Sharf of the University of California.*

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***\*Correction, February 8, 2006:****This piece originally referred to the grandson of Mohammed as Ali. Mohammed's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, is better known as Husayn. The imam known as Ali was Mohammed's cousin. Click*[*here*](http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2135670#b)*to return to the corrected sentence.*

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