

Why Muslims regard images of Mohammed as blasphemous

The Koran contains a general reference to the worshipping of idols being a “manifest error”, without referring to pictures of Mohammed, but ancient oral traditions, called Hadith, quote Allah as saying it is “unjust” to “try to create the likeness of My creation”.

Another Hadith says that “all the painters who make pictures would be in the fire of Hell”.

Islamic scholars are divided over whether it is ever permissible to depict the Prophet, though the biggest controversies in recent years have followed depictions which are mocking or disrespectful.

In 2005 a Danish newspaper caused worldwide controversy by publishing a set of cartoons depicting Mohammed, including one in which he wore a turban shaped like a bomb.

Angry protests were staged outside Danish embassies in London and elsewhere, and in 2008 police in Denmark arrested three men on suspicion of plotting to murder one of the cartoonists, Kurt Westergaard.

The cartoon show South Park, which has a history of satirising religious figures including Jesus, featured Mohammed in an episode in 2001, without provoking a major backlash.

In 2006 its creators intended to feature Mohammed in another episode, inspired by the Danish cartoon controversy, but were banned from doing so by the Comedy Central network.

The cartoonists did feature Mohammed, dressed in a bear suit, in an episode broadcast on April 14 this year, but references to him in subsequent broadcasts were heavily censored after warnings of reprisals.