Freedom From Offense

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The holiday season is here and that means it's time to engage in the time-honored Christmas tradition of objecting to every time-honored Christmas tradition. Australia is a gazillion time-zones ahead of the United States — it may even be Boxing Day there already — so they got in first this year with a truly fantastic headline:

"Santas Warned 'Ho Ho Ho' Offensive To Women."

Really. As the story continued: "Sydney's Santa Clauses have instead been instructed to say 'ha ha ha' instead, the Daily Telegraph reported. One disgruntled Santa told the newspaper a recruitment firm warned him not to use 'ho ho ho' because it could frighten children and was too close to 'ho,' a US slang term for prostitute."

If I were a female resident of Sydney, I think I'd be more offended by the assumption that Australian women and US prostitutes are that easily confused. As the old gangsta-rap vaudeville routine used to go: "Who was that ho I saw you with last night?" "That was no ho, that was my bitch."

But the point is the right not to be offended is now the most sacred right in the world. The right to freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of movement, all are as nothing compared to the universal right to freedom from offence. It's surely only a matter of time before "sensitivity training" is matched by equally rigorous "inoffensiveness training" courses. A musician friend of mine once took a gig at an elevator-music session, and, after an hour or two of playing insipid orchestral

arrangements of "Moon River" and "Windmills Of Your Mind," some of the lads' attention would start to wander and they'd toot their horns a little too boisterously, and the conductor would stop and admonish them to bland things down a bit. In a world in which everyone is ready to take offence, it's hard to keep the mood muzak evenly modulated.

For example, when I said the right not to be offended is now the most "sacred" right in the world, I certainly didn't mean to offend persons of a non-theistic persuasion. In Hanover, New Hampshire, home to Dartmouth College, an atheist and an agnostic known only as "Jan and Pat Doe" (which is which is hard to say) are suing because their three schoolchildren are forced to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

Well, okay, they're not forced to say it. The Pledge is voluntary. You're allowed to sit down, or, more discreetly, stand silently, which is what the taciturn Yankee menfolk who think it's uncool to sing do during the hymns at my local church. But that's not enough for "the Does." Because the Pledge mentions God, their children are forced, as it were, not to say it. And, as "Mr. and Mrs. Doe" put it in their complaint, having to opt out of participation in a voluntary act exposes their children to potential "peer pressure" from the other students. US courts have not traditionally been sympathetic to this argument. The ACLU and other litigious types might more profitably explore the line that the Pledge of Allegiance is deeply offensive to millions of illegal aliens in the public school system forced to pledge allegiance to the flag of a country they're not citizens or even legally-admitted tourists of.

Let us now cross from the New Hampshire school system to the Sudanese school system. Or as the Associated Press headline put it:

"Thousands In Sudan Call For British Teddy Bear Teacher's Execution."

Last week, Gillian Gibbons, a British schoolteacher working in Khartoum, one of the crummiest basket-case dumps on the planet — whoops, I mean one of the most lively and vibrant strands in the rich tapestry of our multicultural world — anyway, Mrs. Gibbons was sentenced last week to 15 days in jail because she was guilty of, er, allowing a teddy bear to be named "Mohammed." She wasn't so foolish as to name the teddy Mohammed herself. But, in an ill-advised Sudanese foray into democracy, she'd let her grade-school students vote on what name they wanted to give the classroom teddy, and being good Muslims they voted for their favorite name: Mohammed.

Big mistake. There's apparently a whole section in the Koran about how if you name cuddly toys after the Prophet you have to be decapitated. Well, actually there isn't. But why let theological pedantry deprive you of the opportunity to stick it to the infidel? Mrs. Gibbons is regarded as lucky to get 15 days in jail, when the court could have imposed six months and 40 lashes. But even that wouldn't have been good

enough for the mob in Khartoum. The protesters shouted "No tolerance. Execution" and "Kill her. Kill her by firing squad" and "Shame, shame to the UK" — which persists in sending out imperialist schoolma'ams to impose idolatrous teddy bears on the youth of Sudan. Whether or not the British are best placed to defend Mrs. Gibbons is itself questionable after a UK court decision this week: following an altercation with another driver, Michael Forsythe was given a suspended sentence of ten weeks in jail for "racially aggravated disorderly behavior" for calling Lorna Steele an "English bitch." "Racially aggravated?" Indeed. Ms. Steele is not English, but Welsh.

Still, at exactly the time Gillian Gibbons caught the eye of the Sudanese authorities, a 19-year old Saudi woman was sentenced to 200 lashes and six months in jail. Her crime? She'd been abducted and gang-raped by seven men. Originally, she'd been sentenced to 90 lashes, but her lawyer had appealed and so the court increased it to 200 and jail time. Anybody on the streets in Sudan or anywhere else in the Muslim world who wants to protest that? Cue crickets chirping "Allahu akbar."

East is east and west is west and in both we take offence at nothing: Santas saying "Ho ho ho," teddy bears called Mohammed. And yet the difference is very telling: The now annual Santa suits in the "war on Christmas" and the determination to abolish even such anodyne expressions of faith as the Pledge of Allegiance are assaults on the very possibility of a common culture. By contrast, the teddy bear rubbish is a crude demonstration of cultural muscle intended to cow and intimidate. When east meets west, when offended Muslims find themselves operating in western nations, they discover that both techniques are useful: some march in the streets Khartoum-style calling for the Pope to be beheaded, others use the mechanisms of the west's litigious, perpetual grievance culture to harass opponents into silence. Perhaps somewhere in Sydney there's a woman who's genuinely offended by hearing Santa say "ho ho ho" just as those Hanover atheists claim to be genuinely offended by the Pledge of Allegiance. But their complaints are frivolous and decadent, and more determined groups are using the patterns they've established to shut down debate on things we should be talking about. The ability to give and take offence is what separates free societies from Sudan.