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Euphemism alert

On the well-chosen use of the word "youths" by Reuters.

In "Portrait of an Age," G. M. Young's classic overview of early Victorian England, there are a few melancholy pages devoted to the devastating Irish potato famine of the mid-1840s. Young notes in an aside that Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, followed polite opinion in referring to the disappointing tuber as "That Root" instead of calling it by its common name. "[I]n all the prayers offered up for our Irish brethren," Young observes, "potatoes were never mentioned."

Young describes this policy of politesse as "characteristic of Early Victorian manners," and perhaps it was. It is also characteristic of a certain perennial timidity that refuses to call untoward realities by their correct names. Consider the opening of this story from Reuters about the latest rash of rioting in Copenhagen:

DANISH YOUTHS RIOT FOR SIXTH NIGHT Gangs of rioters set fire to cars and garbage trucks in northern Copenhagen on Friday, the sixth night of rioting and vandalism that has spread from the capital to other Danish cities, police said on Saturday.

Five youths were arrested in the capital on Friday after 28 cars and 35 garbage trucks were burned, Copenhagen police duty officer Jakob Kristensen told Reuters.

Danish media said arrests in other towns brought to 29 the number of people police were holding.

Scores of cars and several schools have been vandalized or burned in the past week. Police could give no reason, but said that unusually mild weather and the closure of

schools for a winter break might have contributed.

That odd odor you smell is the aroma of politically correct mendacity wafting through the hallway. Danish *youths* torching cars for six nights running because spring is coming? In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of arson? What's wrong with this carcass? You can't tell from the first four paragraphs, but the cat peeks out of the burka in the paragraphs that follow: "Police arrested two Tunisians and a Dane of Moroccan descent on Tuesday... ."

"Ah ha!," you say, "that sort of 'youth' is out there with the gasoline and lighted matches." And why were the "two Tunisians and a Dane of Moroccan descent" arrested? Why, "for planning to kill a cartoonist who drew one of the cartoons printed in a Danish newspaper two years ago that roused a storm of protest in Muslim countries."

You remember the Danish cartoon contretemps: that was when (it was one time when) some adherents of the Religion of Peace went postal and started baying for blood, organizing boycotts, and setting fire to various Danish embassies around the world.

The Reuters story goes on to note that fifteen Danish papers reprinted the drawing by the poor bastard of a cartoonist who is now shuttling from safe house to safe house to escape the Wrath of Khan. "Several hundred Muslims gathered in central Copenhagen on Friday to protest against publication of the cartoon. Most Muslims consider depictions of founder of Islam offensive."

We'd like to make two points: 1. Where is the connection between the "youths" of the opening paragraphs and the "several hundred Muslims" who gathered to protest that slip into the story at the end? Why does Reuters take advantage of the Peel option, referring to "youths" ("That Root") instead of "Muslim youths" (the "plain potato")? It's not "manners," as Young suggested was the motivation for Sir Robert, but a desire to avoid reality, AKA cravenness. Reuters, remember, was the news service that, following the bombings of September 11, cashiered the word "terrorist" because, Steven Jukes, Reuter's global head of news, wrote, "We all know that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Do we really? 2. One thing we all do know is that Muslims are "offended" by depictions of Muhammad. In fact, the list of the things Muslims are offended by would take over a culture. They didn't like ice cream that was distributed by Burger King because a decoration on the lid looked (sort of) like the Arabic script for "Allah." They are offended by "pig-related items, including toys, porcelain figures, calendars and even a tissue box featuring Winnie the Pooh and Piglet" appearing in the workplace. They take umbrage at describing Islamic terrorism as, well, Islamic terrorism and have managed to persuade Gordon Brown to rename it "anti-Islamic activity." But here's the thing: one of the features of living in a modern, secular democracy is that there is always plenty of offense to go around. No Muslim is more offended by cartoons of their Prophet than we are by their barbaric reaction to the cartoons. But their reaction when offended is to torch an embassy, shoot a nun, or knife a filmmaker. Where will it end?

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