

Strange conceptions: Out of context

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

The Holy Ghost is a pedophile. No, that opener does not mean that I have gone off half-cocked or whole-cocked. Blasphemy is not my game, now or ever. Keeping the sacred sacred is part of our mission on these pages, and I would not risk losing readers' trust on this score. So why begin that way?

I wanted to try that sentence on for size, to see how it felt to word-process it, to let it trip on the tongue and resound in the ear. It's all part of an exercise in empathy. Calling the Third Person of the Trinity a pedophile is stranger stuff than calling a human, even a prophet, such. But there are parallels.

The prophet in question is Muhammad. As every Muslim in the world now knows—via Internet and grapevine and propaganda machine—former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines made the charge at an SBC gathering in June. He added as a little fillip that the Prophet was not only a pedophile, but “a demon-possessed” one. His documentation for this was that Muhammad “had 12 wives, the last one of which was a nine-year-old girl.” Current SBC president Jack Graham seconded the characterization.

I hold no brief for Islam or Muhammad and have no interest in defending the prophet's marital practices—practices which, Islam's apologists remind the public, were run-of-the-mill for biblical heroes like David, Solomon and the patriarchs whom Baptists admire. I do hold a brief for keeping things cool, as Vines and Graham do not, and for honest and fair attempts to see things in context. Rip something out of context, and it can be doubly offensive.

Some years ago in Russia my wife and I stood before an icon of the Annunciation. Our icon-expert guide had moved on and a tourist asked our bus-driver what that icon represented. She answered, “Oh, that little bird is impregnating that little girl and their baby is going to be different.” Maybe that is how communists conceived the Conception, or maybe it was just her innocent half-informed response. But the “little girl” emphasis reminded us of the context of Mary's betrothal and of her age at the time of conception. Here is where the bizarre but parallel notion of pedophilia

comes in.

Every anthropologist, Talmudist and conservative New Testament scholar can substantiate what writers of your and my Sunday school literature well knew: If Mary was like other girls up and down the block—and the biblical narrative stresses her ordinariness, her humility—she would have been only 12 years old, maybe 13 at the time. Now, that is not nine, but in our ordinary humble lives impregnation at that age would be, shall we say, frowned upon. We Christians learn to put on different spectacles when we read about biblical patriarchs and kings or about Joseph, the Holy Spirit and Mary than we do when we read the newspapers.

My file of instances of “People Whipping Up Muslims and Christians in Order to Stimulate Holy War” is growing. The one pocket bulges with instances from the world of Islamic militants. It is sad that the file of clippings on Christians also is beginning to bulge. There are many ways to fight terrorism without demonizing what “the other” holds sacred. If Christians want that “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West to turn into a war of religions, the bloodiest kind of horrors which, in the present case, could be terminal, one must say: “Father, forgive them,” but “they know what they do.”