

Muhammad Cartoons: Clash of Cultures

by Helle Dale

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The interpretation of the outbreak of violence, demonstrations and mayhem in the Muslim world against the now famous 12 cartoons in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, inevitably has to be that it is the fulfillment of Samuel Huntington's prediction of the coming clash of civilizations.

On the one hand, starkly stand the secular culture and liberal democracies of Europe, and in particular Scandinavia, where freedom of expression reigns, including the right to caricature religion -- Christianity and Islam alike. Having experienced "art works" like Andres Seranno's "Piss Christ," Americans are not unfamiliar with the phenomenon of offense caused to religious sensibilities in the name of freedom of expression.

On the other hand, we have the Muslim world's outrage at any insult to the prophet Muhammad, which has now been fanned by radical forces into a violent frenzy. Arab governments are boycotting Danish products. Iraq is boycotting Danish reconstruction aid. In Syria, the Norwegian and Danish embassies have been torched. Death, decapitation and mutilation are threatened against blasphemers, Danes in particular, by crowds from the Palestinian Authority to Syria to Indonesia.

This series of events could be the wakeup call that Europe has been waiting for since September 11, when Americans found that war had been declared on this country by al Qaeda and its ilk. And of course, that could be a silver lining we should perhaps be thankful for in the midst of all this mayhem. A cherished European principle and a fundamental aspect of liberal democracy are under attack, and Europeans have finally found a voice. "We are all Danes now," a European newspaper in Brussels proclaimed. Good for them.

The various subtexts at once indicate, however, that the story is a little more complicated than this, and, yet also, that a real clash of civilizations is taking place on many levels. One has to applaud the stand taken by European media and governments like the Danish against the efforts to encroach on their constitutional freedoms. Yet, the cherished freedom of expression that has made numerous European papers republish the cartoons and that caused political leaders to speak out against the Muslim efforts to have them censor their media has been eroded grievously in Europe by the forces of political correctness in recent decades.

Other controversial subjects, such as homosexuality, gay marriage, women's rights or abortion, are not accorded the same protection in terms of free speech, and are all but taboo in public discussion. In other words, the issues that Europe's secular societies have come to hold dear are certainly not open to the same debate as is religion, a subject not held in terribly high regard by most in Europe today.

Interestingly also, Europe's own Muslim populations, who perhaps are assimilating more than they realize, have not responded in the same way as the rioting mobs and embassy burners in the Middle East. They are after all enjoying the protection, living standards and freedoms guaranteed by European states. In Denmark, local Muslims have begun speaking out in solidarity with their adopted country. Many want their children to grow up as Danes, with all the prosperity and opportunity that affords.

Meanwhile, the riots in the Middle East coincided roughly with the elections in the Palestinian Authority, which brought to power the terrorist organization Hamas. Now, the six-month-old Danish cartoons seem to have been an occasion for radicalizing the population, and have certainly also been exploited that way by

governments in other countries like Syria. In support of this idea is the fact that depictions of Muhammad have been around for centuries, in Islamic manuscripts and elsewhere. There is absolutely no reason why the reaction should be so violent to images published a faraway country in a newspaper most of the rioters have never seen -- unless there is a political advantage to be had in whipping up wrath against the West.

In this clash of cultures, the United States has found it disappointingly hard to find a voice. This is despite the fact that Denmark has stood steadfastly with the United States and is one of the few allies in Iraq that has been there from the beginning, never once threatening to pull back its troops. The State Department's immediate reaction was mealy-mouthed, "We fully recognize and respect freedom of the press and expression, but it must be coupled with press responsibility. Inciting religious hatred in this manner is not acceptable." This is not the way to stand by a good ally under fire.

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