

The Row over the Danish Cartoons

by Harsha Walia; February 06, 2006

From the burning of its flag to a boycott of its brands of butter and cookies, Denmark is feeling global outrage over newspaper cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Danish paper Jyllands-Posten first published the cartoons on Sept. 30, 2005. The drawings included one showing Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban shaped as a bomb with a lit fuse. Another portrayed him with a bushy gray beard and holding a sword, his eyes covered by a black rectangle. A third pictured a middle-aged prophet standing in the desert with a walking stick, in front of a donkey and a sunset. The purpose of the cartoons, the chief editor said, was "to examine whether people would succumb to self-censorship, as we have seen in other cases when it comes to Muslim issues." The paper insisted that it meant no offence.

In the past week alone, crowds of angry people in several Arab countries burned the Danish flag. In Palestine, the European Union offices in Gaza were surrounded; Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Denmark; Libya closed its embassy; and Iraq, Iran, Jordan and Sudan lodged official protests. Danish products were taken off the shelves in Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Kuwait, Bahrain and other countries, forcing one Danish dairy firm to lay off 800 workers.

With growing political and economic pressure, the editors of Jyllands Posten apologised, while defending their right to publish the cartoons. A French newspaper, France Soir, reprinted the Danish cartoons along with drawings of Buddha and Christian and Jewish gods. Its editor declared "no religious dogma can impose its view on a democratic and secular society...we will never apologise for being free to speak, to think and to believe."

The common tag-line in the media surrounding this incident is about the struggle in Western democracies to reconcile the right to free expression with respect for religious belief. Certainly many Muslims themselves believe that the cartoons are offensive because pictorial depictions are prohibited in the religion. Others, however, have offered an alternative explanation. For example, Mr Akkari, a spokesperson for the Danish Muslim delegates, denies that Muslims were unable to accept any portrayals of the prophet Mohammed without reacting in outrage. In an interview with the Telegraph newspaper on February 3, he stated that there were reference books in libraries in Denmark carrying ancient Persian images of the Prophet that caused no offence, but the satirical nature of the newspaper cartoons was deeply offensive.

I come from a region of the world where religious dogma has been manipulated to stir up fanatic frenzies. Hindutva, a right-wing religious fundamentalist ideology, has formulated a political experiment based on communal hatred and the slogan "India for Hindus" has an immensely popular appeal with the formidable blend of religion and ideology. So usually any explanation for an uprising that utilizes religion rings alarms bells in my head.

But I agree that the cartoons are offensive. Not primarily because they violate religious tenets, but because they are offensive in the way that they depict and stereotype the entire Arab community and those perceived to be Muslim.

For example, the dominant media representation surrounding the Danish cartoon controversy is, unsurprisingly, of the stereotypical irrational, uncivilized, frothing Muslim mobster. Even the terminology used such as "rioters" invokes images of senseless people gone wild, much like the media response to the Paris riots. The controversy over these cartoons is also dominating posts in the blogosphere, with emphatic calls to "Free the West!", slanderous rhetoric such as "Welcome to the multicultural society. We let in the bigots, antisemites, homophobes and religious lunatics", and images of veiled women with the caption "What is more obscene? Depicting the Prophet in cartoons or forcing girls and women to live like this in the name of the Prophet?"

The media is increasingly becoming an agent for the communication of societal values. Those who control media are powerful because they are able to control the construction of representations and hence, of what is real. In a world of media spin-doctors, our awkward embrace of an ideal of objectivity can make us passive recipients of the news rather than aggressive analyzers of the inherent biases within it. So let us be clear that the Western media has predominantly used this religious doctrinal explanation- that the Prophet is not supposed to be pictorially depicted- not in an effort to offer a respectful and educational explanation to non-believers; rather it is used to suggest the rigidity and intolerance of the Muslim community in what has been dubbed the “clash of values- freedom of religion versus freedom of expression.”

In *Disturbing Remains*, a collection of essays that explores the transformation of traumatic events into social memory, Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas explain that, “it is through the extreme that the normal is revealed.” Media representations of the protests in reaction to the Danish cartoons represent such an extreme through which the “normal” attitude towards Muslim communities within Denmark and beyond is revealed. A mixture of Arabs, Turks and Kurds, Muslims make up about 3% of Denmark’s population of 5.3 million. As in much of Europe, the Muslim minority remains marginalized and largely alienated from Denmark’s dominant culture. Based on a series of trips across the country in 2005, a delegation of Muslim and Arab community members created a 43-page dossier on racism and Islamophobia in Denmark, which is most evident in the success of far-right, anti-immigrant political party. The Danish People’s Party, riding anti-Muslim resentment, emerged as the third largest party in the past two parliamentary elections in 2001 and 2005.

Of course it is easy for non-Muslims to comment on the harmless nature of cartoons. It is equally simplistic for media commentators to talk about how “open-minded” Western societies are in accepting caricatures of Jesus Christ or other Christian-based satirical representations. The crucial difference here is that the depictions in the Danish cartoons perpetuate the stereotypes of an entire community. Although the cartoons were only of the Prophet Muhammad, his image nonetheless signified and personified all Arabs as savages, terrorists, and desert-dwellers in the Western imagination.

A short section in Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* on popular images and social science representations of Arabs is worth mentioning at length here: “From a faintly outlined stereotype as a camel-riding nomad to an accepted caricature as the embodiment of incompetence and easy defeat: that was all the scope given to an Arab.... In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel: these are some of the traditional Arab roles in the cinema. (pp. 285-287)”

Former President Bill Clinton, who appears to have suddenly become statesman of the year, commented on the cartoons and warned of rising anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice, comparing it to historic anti-Semitism. “So now what are we going to do? ... Replace the anti-Semitic prejudice with anti-Islamic prejudice?” he said at an economic conference in the Qatari capital of Doha. Edward Said also discusses the relationship between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Arabism of the sort expressed by the cartoons: “The transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target [is] made smoothly, since the figure was essentially the same.... Thus the Arab is conceived of now as a shadow that dogs the Jew. In that shadow--because Arabs and Jews are Oriental Semites--can be placed whatever traditional, latent mistrust a Westerner feels toward the Orient. For the Jew of pre-Nazi Europe has bifurcated: what we now have is a Jewish hero, constructed out of a reconstructed cult of the adventurer-pioneer-Orientalist...and his creeping, mysteriously fearsome shadow, the Arab Oriental (286).”

It is not hard to recall the number of times that cartoons depicting Ariel Sharon or other representatives of the Israeli government have prompted immediate protests. Such blatant hypocrisy is not lost on the Arab world; Jews can protest anti-Jewish stereotypes (even when often times allegations of anti-Semitism are attempts to invalidate criticism of Israeli government policies), but Arabs and Muslims cannot protest anti-Arab or Muslim stereotypes. “In (the West) it is considered freedom of speech if they insult Islam and

Muslims,” Mohammed al-Shaibani, a columnist, wrote in Kuwait's Al-Qabas daily Monday. “But such freedom becomes racism and a breach of human rights and anti-Semitism if Arabs and Muslims criticize their religion and religious laws.”

As we know well, freedom of expression is often legally limited when it becomes hateful speech, the rationale for which is that certain forms of hateful speech actually hinders the free speech of those who have been targeted through humiliation and derision and by the process of effectively being silenced. In Canada for example it is a criminal offence to advocate genocide, publicly incite hatred, and willfully promote hatred against an “identifiable group” and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms states that the exercise of the freedom of expression, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to conditions and restrictions. Many radical commentators however argue that the best response to hate speech is not criminalization but more speech. Regardless of whether one agrees that such restrictions on free speech are justifiable or not, it is clear that if such standards are to exist, they should apply equally to protect all communities.

So it is not a Western over-tolerance of multiculturalism that has fueled this indignation; it is a shallow multiculturalism that is hypocritical and invisibilizes the bigoted policies of Western domination and racism. Therefore the huge outcry against these cartoons has less to do with the doctrinal limitations of Islam itself than the social context in the post 9/11 climate and the never-ending “War on Terrorism” within which Muslim and Arab communities operate today. The construction of the Arab terrorist in a Danish cartoon is not harmless or a simple experiment in free speech, it is deeply hateful and affects the inherent dignity of all Arab and Muslim people. The Bush Administration and sensationalist media outlets depend on both the cartoons and the subsequent images of violent Arabs to justify their racism and to sell their illegal war. In response, what such communities are demanding and deserve is an end to the demonization of their communities and the right to full dignity, a genuine and egalitarian multiculturalism, and self-determination within Western borders and beyond Western borders in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan.

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