



The predictable responses to the Danish cartoons

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On 30 September 2005 the Danish newspaper *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten* published the now famous 12 cartoons of the Holy Prophet Muhammed. For the Danish mass media such obvious provocation on the part of *Jyllands-Posten* (*JP*) was not really newsworthy. After all *JP* had published confrontational anti-Islamic pieces many times before. Only when Muslim communities began to react to the offending cartoons and native Danish groups of authors, doctors, dentists, ministers, and others reacted to the tone of the media debate on ethnic minorities, did the mass media begin to cover the cartoon issue and reactions to it. The coverage grew more intense when Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen committed a blunder by refusing to meet with 11 ambassadors representing half a billion Muslim people. Unable to have a dialogue with the Danish government, the ambassadors turned to their governments in the Middle East, while Islamic individuals and groups went to the same countries to talk about the cartoons. One Danish imam phrased it this way: Earlier when we went abroad to talk about anti-Islamic sentiments in Denmark, few people really believed us. With 'the ticking bomb' cartoon, everyone knew exactly what we were talking about and was outraged (Alev, 2005). From here the story turned truly global and released what has been called the most serious crisis in Danish foreign policy since the Second World War.

In the course of events experts of all kinds have joined in to comment on and explain the unfolding global news story. Local reactions were predictable, some said, because the cartoons had simply triggered local outrage and frustration, ignited by social and political tension. The cartoons were not really the problem. Others explained that mass demonstrations and burning of flags were done without protesters having even seen the cartoons. Many words and much ink were wasted on discussing whether the cartoons should have been published or not.

The fact is they *were* published; they *had* an effect and damage *was* done. After all, workers in Denmark lost their jobs, farmers received less money for their milk, and elsewhere people died during violent mass demonstrations, so why discuss nostalgia? In yet other reactions, Danish commentators looked at the cartoons themselves and argued that they could not see what the fuss was about. The images looked remarkably innocent to them. However, their personal 'context-free' assessment is rather beside the point. Since when could you ignore the intention of the communication and isolate it from other readers who might be offended by having Muslim co-citizens associated with terrorism? In other words, how can you find the cartoons innocent when they have offended so many people and led to such global and violent consequences? In addition one could encourage these commentators to take the 'ticking bomb' cartoon to the streets of Cairo and try to convince Muslim bypassers that publishing this cartoon is only a matter of free speech.

Contextualization is important in terms of both global media connections and local sense-making. Publication of the cartoons should be seen as a historical phenomenon that is associated with particular socio-cultural and material circumstances. One needs to be aware of the emergence of neo-nationalism and neo-racism in Denmark since the early 1990s, in particular with the rise of the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party (DPP). During the 2001 election the key theme was immigration and included some of the following comments made to the press by politicians (quoted in Hervik, 2006):

- 'Muslims are just waiting for the right moment to kill us' (Mogens Camre MP, Frenskridspartiet (Progress Party)).
- 'Certain people pose a security risk solely because of their religion, which means that they have to be placed in internment camps' (Inge Dahl Sorensen MP, Venstre (Liberal Party)).
- 'If you try to legislate your way out of these problems [concerning Muslim organizations], it is a historical rule that rats always find new holes, if you cover up the old ones' (Poul Nyrup Rasmussen MP, Socialdemokratiet (Social Democrats)).
- 'After nine years with Nyrup [the former prime minister] refugee and immigrant problems are bigger than ever. More than every second immigrant is without work. The number of people under the family reunification law is increasing and increasing. Danish values have come under pressure from fundamentalist groups' (Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Venstre).

Politics in Denmark is saturated with populism and, if you ask for nuances in the debate about immigration, you are immediately accused of political correctness or being a so-called 'halal hippy'. This type of rhetorical attack was launched by the current prime minister as a 'culture war', reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship between native Danes and the country's Muslim population.

There are two key moments in the history of Danish media coverage of Islam. Firstly, in 1997, the tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* teamed up with the DPP to launch a campaign against immigrants and refugees (the 'foreigners' campaign). Secondly, in 2001, a huge story broke in the press about three young Danish Muslims with Pakistani backgrounds who had 'infiltrated' Danish political parties. In a recent research project I investigated how the Danish media covered this story. The project led to a book-length report, *The Muslims of the Media: An Anthropological Investigation of the Media's Coverage of Religions in Denmark* (Hervik, 2002). My research revealed that the news media had played a not very creditable role in ousting the young Danish-Pakistani politicians from national politics using accusations that they were fundamentalists, supported the Taliban, supported the regime of the late Ayatollah Khomeini (who of course is Shia and the Danish Muslims involved were all Sunni) and supported the death penalty. Not surprisingly, these findings were not popular with Danish news journalists and I became blacklisted. Although I am about the only researcher who has studied *JP's* coverage of Islam over the last decade, I have not been approached by the Danish media covering the cartoon story. Incidentally, the research in 2001 was carried out for the semi-public Board for Ethnic Equality in Copenhagen which was closed by the government with the agreement of the Danish People's Party which saw its chairperson as 'politically correct' and critical of their party. The government and the Danish People's Party were also almost successful in closing the Danish Centre for Human Rights, which was only saved in a limited and re-structured form by strong international intervention.

What is the role of claims of free speech in the cartoon controversy?

Several people have talked about how they were caught between respecting the rights of others not to have their feelings offended and maintaining the right to free speech. In my view, this is a false dilemma. Free speech is not the issue. No one has, to my knowledge, claimed that *JP* did not have the right to publish the cartoons, even the right to

offend people in doing so. And criticizing the message conveyed by the publication is of course not an attack on free speech rights, but falls squarely within them.

For *JP* the immediate prompt to publish the articles was to test whether cartoonists were afraid to publish drawings out of fear of retaliation. This was never the case, say some people in *JP*, but the *JP* hardliners still presented it as an issue of 'self-censorship'. Journalists and the *JP* leadership knew the cartoons were controversial, especially the 'ticking bomb' cartoon. That didn't stop them. They wanted the provocation, taken in as they were by the emerging hostile image of Islam. The free speech argument came in later as a means to justify their irresponsible and disrespectful act.

Jyllands-Posten has a decade-long track record of publishing articles, pictures, editorials and comments with anti-Islamic content. For instance, editorials in the summer of 2001 were filled with offensive, confrontational language when dealing with Islam, for example, comparing young Muslims in Denmark with the Taliban fighters who represented 'Islam's dirty face'. Words like *despicable*, *unenlightened*, *obscure*, *untrustworthy*, *middle-aged* and *abominable* were repeated again and again in articles and editorials. In addition, the political commentator of the newspaper situated the story of the young Muslims within Samuel Huntington's framework, conceptualizing the events in Denmark as a clash between unbridgeable cultures and civilizations. It should also be noted that several journalists working for *JP* opposed confrontational and offensive editorials and the flirtation with ultra-right views of Islam as well as the adoption of narratives about culture clashes. However, cartoonist Kurt Westergård who drew the 'ticking bomb' cartoon has been employed by *JP* for a number of years and has, on previous occasions, drawn other offensive cartoons. In 2001 he drew one of a young Danish Pakistani Muslim on the threshold of Denmark holding a Taliban/terrorist madman's head under his arm, supposedly representing his hidden inner self. Another example of critical discourse on Islam comes from *JP*'s own 'commemoration' of 9/11 in 2005 written by one of *JP*'s most experienced and respected journalists. The front page had a large headline: 'Islam is the most violent [religion]'. The story was based on one controversial source, a right-wing PhD student in Paris who had analysed historical texts, compared them and concluded that today Islam is more violent than other religions.

In sum, much of *JP*'s coverage of Islam as seen through the cartoons, editorials and articles by prominent *JP* journalists, constructs an image of Islam as the enemy. Free speech is used as an excuse for publishing

anti-Islamic messages that seek to reveal the true self of Muslims as 'ticking bombs'.

While Prime Minister Rasmussen is friendly with both British and US governments, his friends have not endorsed his insistence on speaking about free speech. With unusual clarity, George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Jack Straw (and Kofi Annan) have stated that you cannot use freedom of speech to legitimize such disrespectful, offending acts.

Why did the Danish government maintain the focus on free speech?

The short version of the answer is that this argument works well in diverting attention from the issues of racism, islamophobia and xenophobia. The Danish government made two major mistakes during the controversy: on the one hand deciding *not* to meet with the ambassadors, and on the other hand *not* condemning the message contained in the cartoons. Due to the first blunder in October 2005, the government's agenda has had only one item: that of 'damage control'. Within this scheme spin doctors advised the prime minister that two strategies would be particularly fruitful. First, to hold firmly on to the argument that the controversy is about free speech, and second to blame the imams travelling to the Middle East for stirring up trouble.

And it worked. Soon the debate changed and became a question along the lines of: 'we' in Denmark and in the Western world have freedom of speech, 'you guys' in the Muslim world do not, so you have the problem, not us. Sometimes this was even followed by arguments such as, 'we don't want Egyptian officials to come here and limit our freedom of speech, do we?'. Blaming the imams was even more effective, because criticism could be personalized.

Note also that the debate is not really about whether *JP's* publication of the cartoons is about free speech, but by insisting that it is a free speech issue, the government can save face by redirecting attention and blaming Muslims. Former spin doctor Lotte Hansen recently explained the logic of the prime minister's persistent and proactive emphasis on free speech as a question of writing history, as Rasmussen clearly wants the controversy to be remembered as a free speech issue and does not want to be associated with a xenophobic government. Consequently, and not very surprisingly, many Danes subscribe to the free speech aspect, which helps them to place the blame outside Denmark's borders.

My final comment concerns another attempt to free the Danes of responsibility by blaming the world. Several commentators have argued

that the fierce reactions from all corners of the Muslim world are a bit ridiculous, since most people haven't seen the cartoons and do not know the details of the story. Yet, I would argue that protesters certainly have understood all too clearly the hostile sentiment saturating Danish society, a sentiment that seems to insist on telling what some see as 'the real truth' about Muslim citizens.

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