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The Media's Role in a Clash of Misconceptions: The Case of the Danish Muhammad Cartoons

Ali J. Hussain

The Danish cartoon furor of early 2006 was only the most recent episode cited as evidence of a “clash of civilizations.” Although the subject was extensively reported by the global media, the media’s framing of the debate as being between free speech and religious sensitivities was inherently flawed and contributed to further confusion rather than clarification. Moreover, the framework established and perpetuated by the media, that of a debate between freedom of speech and religious sensitivities, obscured the root cause of this conflict: the fact that both the Muslim world and the Western world suffer from gross misconceptions of the other. Although the misconceptions held by the Muslim world are phenomena that are, in relative terms, both more recent and more easily resolved, their counterparts in the Western world have been deeply embedded in the consciousness of Western society for more than a thousand years. This study examines the role of centuries of European media self-censorship on the subject of Muhammad in the most recent episode in this ongoing clash of misconceptions.

Keywords: *Muhammad; images; Islam; free speech; Danish cartoons*

For more than a thousand years, European self-censorship on the subject of Muhammad and Islam has resulted in a culture so misinformed that the false image of Muhammad propagated by early Christians even before the first Crusade has become engrained in the consciousness of the Western world as fact. By contrast, although Islam’s explicit acceptance of major Biblical figures as prophets precludes similar misconceptions toward Jesus and Moses in the Muslim world, political trends since the colonial era, particularly since the establishment of the state of Israel and more recent American involvement in Kuwait and then in Iraq, have resulted in the establishment of an image of a neocolonialist crusading “West” among many Muslims. There exist elements in both worlds with a keen interest in nurturing these and other misconceptions

to support the notion, articulated by Huntington (1996) and repopularized in recent years, of a global clash of apparently incompatible civilizations. Throughout the recent furor over cartoons depicting Muhammad, the global media emphasized this apparent contradiction by framing the discourse essentially as a contest between free speech and religious sensitivities. Yet these two subjects had little, if any, relevance to the operative factor in the conflict. In fact, the media's creation of and subsequent focus on a debate between "free speech versus religious sensitivity" only obscured what was actually the root of the problem. This study shows that the Muhammad cartoon furor of earlier this year is only the most recent manifestation of a centuries-long "clash of misconceptions."

Whereas the relevant misconceptions in the Muslim world are relatively recent in the broader historical sense and largely reactions to political and military developments, the misconceptions of the Western world have been deeply rooted in nearly all aspects of Western culture almost since Christendom's first encounters with Islam in the seventh century. This is not to say that Muslims did not create images of the enemy Christian "other" as early as the Crusade era. They did (Lewis 1993). But these Muslim images of the "other" did not so thoroughly permeate nearly all aspects of Islamic civilization as their counterparts did Christendom and the Western civilization that later inherited it. The most analogous, but not even nearly equivalent, example for Islamic civilization would have been images of the Mongols. But even the images of marauding Mongol hordes did not penetrate every aspect of the literature, poetry, song, and visual arts of the Muslim world as did Christendom's false images of Muhammad and Muslims. For its part, the Muslim world's contribution to this recent clash of misconceptions comprises two distinct erroneous notions.

The first is that many Muslims believe that Western artists would never profane their own religious figures as they do Muhammad. This involves a lack of understanding of the secularization of Western societies. Although secular elements exist in the Muslim world, the vast majority of which is governed by secular governments antagonistic toward Islamic parties and organizations, the secularization experienced by Europe over a period of five centuries was artificially transplanted into the Muslim world in the postcolonial era, no more than a century ago. Moreover, this foreign transplant did not transform the culture as thoroughly because it never took deep enough root in Muslim lands to de-Islamize the culture to the same extent that Europe was, for the most part, de-Christianized. Most lay Middle Easterners who are not intimately familiar with the secular nature of European culture are unaware of the existence of controversial artwork profaning Christian holy figures in European and American art museums, such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of Jesus on a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. Although popular reception of such artwork in Europe and the United States ranged from enthusiastic to antagonistic, these works of art never elicited a broad-based outcry from the population

as a whole. Ironically, Muslims' tremendous respect for Jesus, Mary, and other major Biblical figures would likely have led to violent outbursts similar to the Danish cartoon protests if such images had been exhibited in the Muslim world. An understanding of the inherently secular nature of a society, or lack thereof, contributes significantly to exacerbating or resolving cultural conflicts such as the Danish cartoon episode. Anthropologist Gregory Starrett (2006) mentions that "those who do not understand why Muslims react badly to insults to their Prophet, or who do not understand why Europeans might profane the holy, are left with only the image of an unapproachable Other. Those who do understand these reactions, on the other hand, are too often busy provoking them for their own benefit" (p. 27). Nevertheless, this misconception among Muslims, that of a lack of Western artists profaning Western holy figures, is a minor factor when compared to the second and much more significant misconception that contributed to the violent cartoon protests throughout the Muslim world.

This second misconception, the currently widespread notion among many Muslims that the West is engaged in a renewed Crusade against Islam, is the result of relatively recent political trends, particularly since the establishment of the state of Israel (1948) and more recent American and British involvement in Kuwait (1991), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003). And rather than dispelling such notions, unwise use of such heavily value-laden terms as a "Crusade" against evil in widely publicized speeches by Western political leaders serves only to exacerbate already existing tensions. However, since the Muslim world's current misconceptions of the neocrusading West are largely the result of developments in foreign policy, their resolution lies equally in the realm of foreign policy, as evidenced by attempts that have already been made to address these misconceptions by way of government programs aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" of the Muslim world. By comparison, resolution of the problem of the Western world's misconceptions, the distorted images of the Islamic "other" that have so thoroughly permeated the literature, arts, and news media of an entire civilization for more than a thousand years, is a far more difficult task. The former will be left to foreign policy experts, whereas the following will be a scholarly study focusing on the latter.

An examination of the media's presentation of the cartoon furor, including both the framework and the discourse itself, shows that the media's presentations to the consumer public were problematic on numerous levels. On one hand, the very essence of the debate itself was questionable. Professional political cartoonist Daryl Cagle, who maintains an excellent Web site devoted to editorial cartoons from around the world and cartoon-related issues, poignantly and correctly noted that the very framework of the debate was essentially flawed. In his comments on the reaction of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC), Cagle criticizes the association's official statement on the

cartoon violence, saying, "After defending free speech, the AAEC concludes by addressing 'both sides' as though there were two sides to this issue that need to be addressed" (Cagle 2006). In the view of this author, Cagle is absolutely correct. Free speech must be, by definition, free. Otherwise, it would not be free speech. There can be little doubt that the overly cautious reactions of major Western governments were a calculated exchange of foundational principles for political expediency. Numerous journalists found this development distressing and rightly so. Writer Christopher Hitchens (Reynolds 2006b) commented after one State Department briefing in Washington, "How appalling for the country of the First Amendment to be represented by such an administration," while, in the United Kingdom, columnist Melanie Phillips criticized the "pathological reluctance of the leaders of Britain and America to face up to the blindingly obvious and the extent to which they have already run up the white flag in the face of clerical fascism" (Reynolds 2006b). Only a suspension of critical faculties would permit one to believe that American, British, and French government officials would have responded similarly had the current political climate, so recently after the Abu Ghraib scandal, the London suicide bombings, and the Paris riots, not existed. Fear of Muslim violence on local soil and political delicacy aside, however, it is clear that the basic principle of free speech was not at issue. Similarly, the notion of religious sensitivity, framed by the media as the opposite pole in the dichotomy of this debate, also had little or nothing to do with the misconceptions that were the root of the problem, for, as we shall see, the notion that depictions of Muhammad are banned in Islam is largely irrelevant.

In addition to the framework for the debate as established by the media, the discourse itself was problematic. Media sources regularly made use of terms and structures that were liable to mislead their audiences. BBC news, for example, repeatedly mentioned such phrases as "depictions of Muhammad or Allah are banned in Islam." What may appear initially to be nine innocuous words, in fact, have a tremendous impact in misleading millions of media consumers by creating and encouraging false notions about Muhammad and Islam. The sentence in which this phrase appeared, in particular, is extremely misleading on several levels. First of all, as will be shown in detail later, it is not entirely accurate. Islam is far from a single, monolithic entity, and there exist numerous paintings of Muhammad painted by Muslim artists and commissioned by Muslim patrons. Second, the very wording of this statement is deceptive in several ways. Use of the Arabic word *Allah* in an English sentence is not only incorrect, it is also extremely biased. *Allah* is the Arabic language equivalent for *God* in the English language. The English word *God* and the French *Dieu* are linguistic equivalents. Saying (in English) that "Muslims believe in *Allah*" is just as incorrect and misleading as saying that "the French believe in *Dieu*." Arab Christians use the word *Allah* when referring to God in their language, and Arabic Bibles are replete with references to Allah on nearly every page. Yet Western media's use

of the Arabic word *Allah* in news reports in English and various European languages falsely implies that the God of the Muslim world is different from “our” God. Third, including the phrase “or Allah” immediately after “Muhammad” may easily be misread as an appositive, indicating that Allah is synonymous with Muhammad. This is particularly the case in audio and video broadcasts, where the listeners and viewers lack the advantage of punctuation to clarify potential ambiguities.

An analysis of the BBC’s reporting of the cartoon furor on its Internet site indicates that of the twenty news articles posted that referred to Muhammad and Allah in the same sentence when describing an Islamic ban on depictions, more than half made use of some form of the ambiguous construction above.¹ Six used a different conjunction, stating “Allah and the Prophet Muhammad,”² which, although it can no longer be confused for an appositive, remains ambiguous, as it might indicate that depictions of God and Muhammad together are banned. One made use of a different phrase altogether, indicating that the ban covered “Allah, Muhammad, and all the major figures of the Christian and Jewish traditions” (“Indonesia Cartoon Protests Spread” 2006). The only news report that composed the phrase in such a way as to avoid confusion was the first, stating that Islam bans depictions “of Muhammad or of Allah” (“Row Deepens over Danish Cartoons” 2005), yet even this statement remains problematic on the other two counts. Moreover, it is unclear why BBC reporters would have chosen to use the more ambiguous phrasing, which increased the possibility for confusing the issue, in later reports, which corresponded chronologically to the period of greatest tension and most violent riots. All together, these potential ambiguities prove Fowler’s (1991) notion that “representation in a semiotic medium such as language is inevitably a structuring process” (p. 208), and the use of this phrase in news reports such as those cited above shows “the power of the structural minutiae of images and words to impose a value-laden organization on news in the process of articulating it” (Fowler 1991: 222).

In any case, the overall inaccuracy of statements such as those cited earlier, combined with the misleading use of foreign language vocabulary in an English sentence, as well as the ambiguous phrasal construction, all lead to gross misconceptions among the public consuming such media reports. The media’s widespread use of statements such as the one above further complicated the matter for lay Western readers, as most uninformed members of largely Christian societies tend to believe, wrongly, that Muslims view Muhammad just as Christians view Jesus: as divinity incarnate. This was evidenced clearly in *France Soir*’s headline after its editors decided to republish the Danish cartoons, “*Oui, on a le droit de caricaturer Dieu*” (“Yes, one has the right to caricature God”). The now outdated terms *Mohammedanism* for Islam and *Mohammedan* for Muslim are products of this fallacy and all its implications. Though the terms are now obsolete, the false perceptions of Muhammad and Islam on which they were based persist in Western societies and their media to this day.

Although it is true that there are no depictions of God in the arts of Islamic societies, there are numerous extant examples of depictions of Muhammad. The orthodox Islamic ban on such depictions is certainly nothing new, nor is the occasional rejection of this ban by members of the artistic establishment in Islamic societies. Generally, artistic depictions of Muhammad nearly always portray the Prophet's head engulfed by flames (the Middle Eastern equivalent of a halo signifying holiness) and often veil the face or exclude facial features altogether. But there are exceptions. Manuscripts drawn either by Muslim artists or by non-Muslim artists for Muslim patrons exist in collections at museums and archives around the globe. Sir Thomas W. Arnold's (1965) *Painting in Islam* includes more than half a dozen plates of paintings of Muhammad³ as well as an example of artwork apparently mutilated by those with religious scruples (Plate VII), where the faces of human figures have been erased. Sir Arnold (1965) mentions that although numerous examples exist,

pictures of Muhammad in which his features are visible are comparatively rare and most frequently occur in the earlier period. From the sixteenth century onwards a convention became established of hanging a short veil from the forehead to the chin, over the face of the Prophet, so that his features were hidden. Such a concession to orthodox sentiment also occurs in representations of other Prophets, such as Abraham, &c., and the early saints of Islam. (p. 98)

In spite of the disapproval of the religious establishment, the existence of such manuscripts including depictions of Muhammad indicates that the general public as a whole did not always take such theoretical opinions seriously in practice. At the very least, one must admit that the high artisans of Islamic societies who painted these miniatures did not always heed the warnings of the religious establishment. Moreover, because involvement in such artwork was a costly trade, as in any society, artisans were often patronized either by the ruling elite or by wealthy merchants. David Rice's (1965: 216) *Islamic Art*, for example, includes a folio of Muhammad fully depicted with facial features.⁴ This folio, now at Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, is part of a *mi'rāj-nāmeḥ* (account of Muhammad's legendary ascent to heaven) done in 1436 under Shah Rukh (1404–47), the eldest and most important son of emperor Timur Lang, known in the West by his Latinized name, Tamerlane. As the above examples clearly show, members of at least these two classes of Islamic society, the artists themselves and the wealthy patrons who commissioned such paintings, neglected the religious orthodoxy's ban on depictions of Muhammad. The existence of such depictions of Muhammad throughout Islamic history proves that the notion that the Muslim protests resulted from the mere fact that cartoonists drew images of Muhammad is, at the very least, questionable and, at most, ludicrous.

Though many of the protesters themselves may not have been consciously aware of it, they were not protesting so much the fact that Muhammad was

being depicted, nor even the fact that they were satirical depictions, but the vile nature of the cartoons' slanderous implications.⁵ As this study will show, the issue is not so much that democratic principles of free speech allow Western media sources to publish depictions of religious figures but the generally respectful way in which depictions of Western religious figures are drawn relative to depictions of Muhammad. Although Western media depictions of Jesus, Moses, or God tend to separate clearly the actions or attitudes of extremist and fundamentalist Christians or Jews from the personality of the founder of their respective faiths, there is a readiness, and sometimes even eagerness, in the media to attribute the characteristics and actions of Muslim fundamentalists to Muhammad himself.

This clearly discriminatory behavior is not perceived as a double standard in the Western media because, as mentioned above with the case of "Mohammedanism," the misinformation that has led to Western society's inaccurate understanding of Muhammad and Islam has thoroughly permeated European culture for more than a millennium. Although Muslim masses and protesters see a very clear case of discrimination with regard to the Danish cartoons, the Western media establishment viewed the cartoons as just another example of religious satire equal to their satire of their own religious figures. Western civilization has been so biased for so long that it does not even notice this discrimination. This false image of Muhammad and Islam that has been propagated in Europe for more than a thousand years has so thoroughly permeated European culture and the American culture that inherited it that the misconceptions have been transmitted intergenerationally as historical fact. It is only recently (within less than a century) that Western scholars of Islam have begun to profess true objectivity with regard to the "historical" Muhammad. Prior to this relatively recent phenomenon, European public opinion was shaped by nearly a millennium of arguably deliberate misinformation.

The Development of Europe's Misconceptions

What Wittebols (1991) has noticed in the context of current media coverage of terrorism, that "the media's role in mobilizing public opinion . . . exemplifies its role as a catalyst in grooming public consciousness" (p. 262), has been in effect in Europe's misrepresentation of Muhammad for centuries. Such inaccurate images of Muhammad and Islam predate even the first Crusade. In fact, their precedence was a major force in helping to legitimize the anti-Muslim crusading campaigns. These phenomena have been described by many of the leading non-Muslim scholars of Islamic studies at Western universities during the past century, including the likes of W. Montgomery Watt, Marshall G. Hodgson, and Annemarie Schimmel, as well as numerous contemporary scholars. It has been well documented that during Christian scholars' first encounters with

Islam, they were keenly aware of Muslims' firm belief in Jesus and in the immaculate conception, which, ironically, is mentioned in even greater detail in the *Qur'an* than in the Bible.⁶ But Islam's very clear condemnation of the notion of a trinity led these early Christian scholars to classify Islam as yet another of the many Christian heresies that existed in the early centuries of Christian history (Lewis 1993: 7; Watt 1983: 3). Thus, Muhammad himself was initially viewed as a Christian heretic. Eventually, early Christian writers' distortions of the image of Muhammad and Islam became so perverse that "Mahound, a deformation of the name of the Prophet [Muhammad], was popularly identified with the devil" (Watt 1983: 3–4) and Muhammad appeared regularly in European literature as the devil incarnate. Watt (1983) provides an elegant summary of the historical facts when he states,

Among the points which went to compose this "distorted image" of Islam were the following: Islamic doctrine contained many false assertions and deliberate perversions of the truth; Islam was a religion of violence, spreading by the sword; it was a religion of self-indulgence, especially sexual; and since Muhammad, besides exhibiting moral weaknesses, was the author of a false religion, he must be a tool or agent of the devil. None of these points could be accepted by an objective historian today. (p. 4)

This focus on Muhammad's sexuality and militancy are themes that have served as the focus of Muhammad's detractors from the earliest European attacks on his character. They have intensified century after century and have yet to cease. These attacks intensified in both quantity and quality during the era of the Crusades, and the increasing trend of defining Islam and Muslims as the exotic "other" in the media of the time (song, literature, and visual arts) served Europe's religio-political interests well. As Bernard Lewis (1993) has noted, "the notion of the other easily changes into the somewhat different but closely related concept of the enemy" (p. 174). To make matters worse, Europe's humiliating defeat in the crusading endeavor by what was then a militarily and culturally dominant Islamic civilization was a serious blow not only to European military and mercantile interests but also to Europe's collective Christian consciousness. Reeves's (2000) excellent scholarly study *Muhammad in Europe* notes that

the Crusades finally proved to be a disastrous military failure for Europe, so that what could not be achieved by physical confrontation had to find an alternative sphere of conflict in vituperation. Muhammad as "Devil incarnate," as "false prophet," was to be the verbal assault weapon that the Christian West obstinately refused to lay down. As the power of Islam continued to grow—the banner being taken up after the Arabs by the Turks—Christian anger was further internalized and deepened. The fictitious picture of Muhammad as a man of unbridled sensuality and militance became established as a cliché preserved with remarkable continuity by later generations. (p. 4)

This fictitious cliché was readily adopted into European popular culture and its premodern media. The false image has so thoroughly pervaded it that examples abound in European paintings, as well as the song, poetry, and drama in numerous European languages and literary traditions. It has been shown quite clearly that “European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire: between the Middle Ages and Eighteenth Century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the authors of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Cid*” (Said 1978: 63), and numerous others were influenced by such exoticized images of the sensuality and militancy of the Islamic East. And this phenomenon was not restricted to popular song and literature but permeated every medium, including music and opera, such as Mozart’s “Abduction from the Seraglio,” which established Mozart’s reputation in Vienna, as well as theater drama and paintings that captured the European imagination.

This very trend in depiction of images of the Islamic “other” was later inherited after the invention of photography and, subsequently, by the film industry. Jack Shaheen (2001) has thoroughly documented the manifestation of this history in the Hollywood film industry in his *Reel Bad Arabs*, a nearly six hundred–page analysis of more than nine hundred Hollywood films depicting and reinforcing negative images of Arabs (and, in the Western mind, Muslims) generation after generation. As with the examples of previous centuries, this thousand-year-long history of distorted images of Muhammad and Islam has been inherited by the modern media industry, which continues to bombard its consumers with images of “Islamic” violence and veiled harems.

These two clichés in particular, the exotic sensuality and militancy of Islam, were and remain so popular in the Western world in part because they seem to be in direct contradiction to traditional Christian concepts of religiosity. This was undoubtedly the reason why the early Christian theologians who first engaged in attacks on Muhammad’s Christian “heresy” focused on the issues of Muhammad’s sexuality and his leadership of military campaigns. For a Christian for whom Jesus represents the prime example of a pious, holy figure, it is impossible to reconcile Muhammad’s nine wives with Jesus’ celibacy. And Muhammad’s recruitment, organization, and leadership of armies of tens of thousands of his followers in military expeditions fighting, as the *Qur’an* mentions repeatedly, “in the way of God” cannot depart any further from the redemptive suffering of Jesus on the cross, allowing his own blood to be shed to wash away the sins of the world with forgiveness. Thus,

for the medieval cleric and scholar, nourished on the core doctrines of Christianity—the separation of spiritual and temporal power, the notion of Christ’s kingdom as “not of this world,” the virtues of celibacy—Muhammad’s example was contrary to all patterns of behaviour associated with religious devotion. (Reeves 2000: 4)

However, the very Christians who cite Muhammad's nine wives as evidence that he was not a "holy man" conveniently neglect Biblical references such as those of King Solomon's seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). And although they readily cite Muhammad's military campaigns as evidence that he was not a "holy man," they neglect to mention the dozens of Old Testament prophets called on by God to lead armies against His enemies. Moreover, no mention at all is made of the fact that Muhammad himself never claimed to be creating a new religion, instead declaring himself, both in quotations attributed to him and in references throughout the *Qur'an*, to be a reformer following in the footsteps of the greatest Biblical prophets. Indeed, the fact that the historical evidence shows Muhammad to be no more sexual or militant, and indeed even less so, than many Old Testament prophets is a probable reason why public vituperative personal attacks on Muhammad's character nearly always stem from Christian, rather than Jewish, sources.

Objective Western scholarship on the subject has shown that although Muhammad's behavior did involve polygamous relationships with his nine wives and leadership of military campaigns "in the way of God," he also encouraged his followers to follow his examples of charity to the poor, caring for widows and orphans, being kind to prisoners of war, and freeing slaves. Yet neither Western popular culture nor modern media disseminate stories of Muhammad's family going to bed hungry as a result of having given away their supper to hungry beggars and orphans, nor of Muhammad's insistence (more than a thousand years before any Western nation) that women be given property and inheritance rights. Unfortunately, as Watt has noted,

the "distorted image" [of Muhammad and Islam], however, has continued to influence the Western understanding of Islam into the present century, despite the efforts of scholars for two hundred years or more to correct the more flagrant distortions. Just as their efforts appeared to be successful certain events linked with the present revival of Islam are causing not a few Westerners to turn back to the "distorted image." (Watt 1983: 4)

It is this tendency that originally fostered the clearly false notion of a clash of incompatible civilizations nearly a millennium ago and later perpetuated it throughout Europe's experience with the Crusades and later still throughout its confrontations with the Ottoman Empire. It should be no surprise that the same imagery has resurfaced once again, along with the same paranoid warnings of a "clash of civilizations" in the recent Danish cartoon episode.

The Danish Cartoons

With regard to the Danish cartoons,⁷ two of them in particular serve as perfect examples of Europe's long history of distorted images mentioned earlier.

The first example is one of a wildly fanatic Muhammad, complete with wild, unkempt moustache and beard, wearing a sheathed sword on his waist and apparently only half-dressed, with an outer vest over only one of his shoulders. Perhaps this implies that he was caught in the act with his women. He is holding a large, sharp dagger in one hand and extending his other arm, in front of two apparently surprised women, fully covered in cloth except for their eyes. It is unclear from the image whether Muhammad is preventing them from moving forward or preventing the viewer from approaching toward them, or both. In any case, Muhammad is the barrier between the women and the viewer. Clearly, this image plays on both of the major themes that compose Europe's millennium-long obsession with Muhammad: the secret exotic sensuality of Muhammad's polygamous relationship with a harem of veiled women and Muhammad's own violent, saber-swinging character. The next example is without doubt the cartoon that most infuriated the Muslim world. It depicts a wild-eyed, fanatical Muhammad, again with wild, unkempt moustache and beard. Incidentally, the style of this drawing is reminiscent of an Ottoman Turk, as opposed to the more Arab appearance of the turban and dress of the figure in the previous image. In this image, Muhammad is wearing a black turban bomb with the *shahādah* (testimony of faith) written in Arabic calligraphy on the turban bomb. The testimony of faith translates in English to "there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." It is the declaration that, when recited orally and sincerely, marks the moment of one's belief in and conversion to Islam. It is, in essence, Islam summarized in seven (Arabic) words. Not only does the artist's adding the declaration of faith to the bomb explicitly label the Islamic religion itself as inherently violent, but the artist's depiction clearly labels Muhammad himself as a bomber. In essence, the cartoon states that Muhammad is a wild-eyed madman founder of a sect of "bombism" known as Islam.

These are excellent examples of the power of cartoon images to "offer news-readers condensed claims or mini-narratives about putative 'problem' conditions and draw upon, and reinforce, taken-for-granted meanings of the world" (Greenberg 2002: 182). In addition, both of these examples exhibit what Gombrich (1978: 127–42), Morris (1993), and others have identified as rhetorical processes in symbolic imagery, particularly "condensation" (of numerous complex phenomena into a single, oversimplified image) and "domestication" (of foreign, abstract, or unfamiliar ideas or persons into a familiar and easily digestible image). The first cartoon condenses numerous complex issues such as Muhammad's relationships with women (all but two of his wives were widows when he married them), their freedoms and restrictions (they were free to travel about in public), and the history of the "veil" (it is not clear exactly what the women wore in Muhammad's time, but it is clear that they did not wear the head-to-toe garments illustrated in the cartoon and commonly photographed in today's media). The cartoon also domesticates the issues by portraying Muhammad as fanatically violent and restrictive toward his women.

Contrary to these images of Muhammad, who as we have shown has epitomized Europe's enemy "other" for more than a thousand years, Western media generally maintain respectful images and depictions of Jesus and other Biblical prophets. Of course, there are some instances of artists profaning the holy, just as there are also instances of positive depictions of Muhammad in European literature, but these are both exceptions rather than the rule. Generally speaking, Jesus and Biblical prophets are depicted positively in Western media. This is only natural, as, in spite of Western society's secular de-Christianization after the Enlightenment, Europe remains culturally Christian and, as recent events have shown, the United States remains for the most part a deeply Christian society despite the official separation of Church and State. A common refrain in the United States and Europe during the Danish cartoon fiasco was, "We also have depictions of Jesus, so what's the problem?" or "We also satirize Jesus" or some variation thereof. As we have already shown, the issue, even if only subconsciously for many Muslims, was not the fact that Muhammad was being depicted but the vile and discriminatory way in which he was being depicted in relation to the West's own religious figures. Clearly, no apology can be made for imposing arbitrary restrictions on the freedom of speech, nor can knowledgeable Muslims claim that a strict orthodox ban on depictions of Muhammad has been universally accepted by all Muslims at all times. Yet the world's media (including in Muslim countries) continued to obscure the essence of the problem by framing the debate as one between free speech and religious sensitivity.

To illustrate this theme, a comparison will be made of several editorial cartoons depicting Biblical prophets in the Western press and several of the Danish editorial cartoons that were the cause of the recent furor. Two issues that have caused editorial cartoonists in the United States to incorporate religious imagery in their cartoons are the Vatican-pedophilia scandals that periodically surface in the press and Christian televangelist Pat Robertson's call in August 2005 for the assassination of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Cartoonists' responses to problems within the Church and to calls for violence from a man many consider a Christian fundamentalist exemplify the conscious or unconscious discrimination exercised by today's Western media with regard to Muhammad and Islam.

In an example of depictions of Jesus during criticism of pedophile priests, a cartoon in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* (Asay 2002)⁸ portrays Jesus with smooth, straight long hair and a beard (both well groomed), with a smiling child sitting on his lap as he recites a Biblical verse condemning to death those who cause "little ones" to sin (Matthew 18:6). In the next frame, Cardinal Law of Boston's Archdiocese, accused of failing to report known sexual misconduct among his subordinates, suggests merely reassigning the (implied) pedophile priests to other locations. It is important to note here that illegal or immoral behavior on the part of individuals professing the Christian faith is not identified with

the faith itself and certainly not with the founder of the faith. Indeed, the cartoon clearly identifies Jesus and the faith he founded as just as much the victims of abuse and manipulation by individuals with sinister motivations as the victims of the pedophile priests. There is a very clear distinction made between the image of Jesus, the founder of the faith, who remains positively portrayed, and the image of the Christian pedophile abusing his position in the church and, in this case, the superior who disregarded the alleged pedophilia. A second example from the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*⁹ (Sack 2002) makes an even more explicit distinction between the views of Jesus and those of the church hierarchy on this issue of pedophile priests by using contrasting facial expressions on the figures drawn. The cartoon depicts a figure dressed in Catholic regalia, presumably a high-ranking authority such as an archbishop (perhaps the Holy See himself), who runs happily through a church and vandalizes it while bearing a wide smile on his face. Among the vandalized portions of the church is a stained-glass image of Jesus, drawn with a clearly saddened expression, with downcast eyes and sad, drooping lips. Again, a clear distinction is made between the person of Jesus himself and his Christian followers who are vested with the robes of his authority but committing atrocities in his name. Jesus himself is depicted as unambiguously dissatisfied with the actions of his dissident followers. In this context, the equivalent of the Danish Muhammad turban-bomb cartoon would have been a depiction of Jesus sexually molesting a young boy. However, no such cartoon was ever published, or probably even contemplated.¹⁰

Although the editorial cartoons depicting the pedophile priest scandal generally involved a distinction made between the figure of Jesus himself and the criticisms levied against an institution founded in his name, cartoons dealing with the issue of Pat Robertson's calls for the assassination of Hugo Chavez were able to focus on Robertson as an individual. It is important to note that a very clear distinction is made between Jesus as the founder of the faith and a Christian fundamentalist advocating violence in his name. The following example (Johansson 2005) is a cartoon from Sweden that satirizes Robertson himself as fostering a perverted, militant interpretation of Jesus' teachings. In this cartoon, Robertson is depicted as professing Christian values by way of images such as a book with a cross on the cover, representing the Bible, in one hand while he wields a firearm at the ready in his other hand. Jesus, drawn in glowing light with a halo above his head, is drawn with long but not unkempt hair and beard. He has a saddened expression on his face and tears in his eyes as he tells Robertson, "We need to talk." In this context, the equivalent of the Danish Muhammad turban-bomb cartoon would have been a depiction of Jesus taking aim with a sniper rifle. Again, however, no such cartoon was ever published, or probably even contemplated. This is because there is a very clear distinction in the minds of the majority of Westerners, including cartoonists, between the teachings of Jesus and the violent actions of Christian fundamentalists. It is interesting that

this image was drawn by Swedish cartoonist Olle Johansson, indicating the cultural congruity between attitudes toward Jesus in both America and Europe.

All of these examples show that there exists a general trend among editorial cartoonists in Western societies that is a reflection of views of the society as a whole. When a Christian public figure calls for assassination, depictions of Jesus as an assassin never result. When a Church priest molests a child, depictions of Jesus molesting a child are never published in the popular press. But when a small fraction of the global Muslim population, unequivocally denounced by the vast majority and by every credible institution representing Islam, propagates the notion that bombing innocent civilians is somehow Islamic, Western cartoonists have no qualms whatsoever about identifying the views of these individuals with the person of Muhammad himself. This is because we all have what Gamson and Stuart (1992) refer to as a "tendency to adopt the frame of one's sources, which increases with sustained contact" (p. 57).

Conclusion

Although in the West the Danish cartoon episode resulted in an instinctive rush to defend free speech and in Muslim communities it resulted in an instinctive rush to defend the Muslim view of Muhammad as a peaceful "holy man," both groups reacted without an awareness of the fact that they were driven unconsciously by a lack of understanding of the essence of the problem. This was exacerbated by the international media, both in the East and West, which framed the debate as one between free speech and religious sensitivity. Fanning the flames on both sides were religious fundamentalists and politicians. In the East, governments interested in ostracizing Denmark before it assumed the rotating presidency of the U.N. Security Council as well as Muslim fundamentalists eager to paint Western civilization as the enemy of Islamic values were more than happy to instigate the masses. In the West, politicians aiming to bring to the fore the issue of integration of Muslim immigrant populations, as well as Christian fundamentalists eager to paint Islam as the enemy of Western civilization, were equally thrilled at the opportunity. Throughout the confrontation, the true issue was obscured by the global media's framing of the ensuing debate as being between zealous defenders of free speech and more violent, but equally zealous, calls for religious sensitivity. Criticisms on both sides often became unreasonable and lost sight of the central issues. The notion that the very act of depicting Muhammad was what instigated the violent protests has been clearly disproven. Only the extremely naïve would believe that a cartoon depicting a handsome, well-groomed Muhammad citing *Qur'anic* verses and castigating Osama Bin Laden would have caused such an international furor.

The operative factor was clearly not the fact that Muhammad was being depicted but the vile and discriminatory nature of the depictions. Other depictions

of Muhammad in Western media, some of which were even more insulting, did not elicit similar responses. In spite of a large Muslim-American fan base, the portrayal of Muhammad as a turbaned figure with the power to shoot flame from his forehead, which appeared on the American animated series *South Park*, failed to elicit such condemnation in large part because Muhammad was satirized along with Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, and Joseph Smith ("Super Best Friends," *South Park*, Season Five, Episode Four). Similarly, extremely offensive depictions of Muhammad on the cartoon series *Jesus and Mo*, in which Muhammad's testicle is visible while he is poolside in a swimsuit, and another instance in which Jesus and Muhammad discuss the possibility of engaging in homosexual experimentation also failed to elicit a furious, violent global response ("Jesus and Mo" Cartoon 2005, 2006). Again, even when factoring the influence of political instigation, such a depiction as the latter example is equally insulting to both the followers of Jesus and those of Muhammad. It is the lack of discrimination in these examples that prevents Muslims from perceiving them as part of a crusade directed solely against their prophet and their faith.

And although some may argue that essential differences between Europe and America preclude the use of American cartoons of Jesus to prove the bias of Danish cartoons of Muhammad, the final example of a Scandinavian cartoonist's depiction of Jesus criticizing a Christian fundamentalist shows that the examples cited remain telling. In fact, the thesis of this study remains valid unless one were to find examples of equivalent treatment of Jesus as the Danish cartoons' treatment of Muhammad. Flemming Rose (2006), the editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, in a letter published in *The Washington Post* titled "Why I Published Those Cartoons" (Rose 2006), states that "the cartoonists treated Islam the same as they treat Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions" (p. B01). But when a cartoonist submitted some cartoons of Jesus to *Jyllands-Posten* in April 2003, one of the editors informed the cartoonist, "I don't think *Jyllands-Posten's* readers will enjoy these drawings. As a matter of fact, I think they will provoke an outcry. Therefore, I will not use them" (Reynolds 2006a). Rose (2006) addresses such issues in his *Washington Post* letter, saying that

on occasion, *Jyllands-Posten* has refused to print satirical cartoons of Jesus, but not because it applies a double-standard. In fact, the same cartoonist who drew the image of Muhammed [sic.] with a bomb in his turban drew a cartoon with Jesus on the cross having dollar notes in his eyes and another with the star of David attached to a bomb fuse. (p. B01)

Not only does this contradict the earlier statements of the editor refusing to "provoke an outcry," the examples he cites are hardly as vituperative as the two *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons cited here. They do not constitute anything near to the equivalent treatment of Jesus as the Danish cartoons' treatment of Muhammad.

A depiction of Muhammad with dollar signs in his eyes or a cartoon of a crescent attached to a bomb fuse would not likely have incited such widespread violent outrage on the streets of the Middle East. In the context of the Christian-related scandals cited earlier, examples of equivalent treatment of Jesus would be depictions of an unkempt, dirty Jesus molesting a child or an unkempt Jesus with wild, fanatical features holding a rifle and taking aim to assassinate an "infidel."

If only Western depictions of Muhammad treated him equally—that is, if only they distinguished the founder of the faith from the fundamentalists who commit atrocities in his name as Western cartoonists do so readily when it comes to Christian and Jewish fundamentalists—their publication would not have elicited such outrage in the Muslim world. More than one angry blogger has erroneously opined the problem to be that Muslims want to be treated differently, that Muslims wish to be exempt from the reach of free speech that affects citizens of Western democracies, that their prophet should be granted greater respect than the West's, that their religious sensitivities should be judged by a different set of standards. As the above study has shown, nothing could be further from the truth. Stripped from the efforts of the governments and fundamentalists who manipulated the thousands of rioting Muslims, the motivation that drove many of those Muslims to take to the streets in frustration was actually nothing more than simply their right to be treated equally.

Notes

1. "Saudis Recall Envoy in Danish Row" 2006; "Gaza EU Offices Raided by Gunmen" 2006; "Gaza Gunmen Surround EU Offices" 2006; "Ten Die in Libya Cartoon Clash" 2006; "Libya Suspends Minister over Riot" 2006. Some qualified the name Muhammad with the title "Prophet": "Danes Face Growing Muslim Storm" 2006; "Nordic Firm Hit by Arab Boycott" 2006; "Arab Ministers Condemn Cartoons" 2006; "France Enters Muslim Cartoon Row" 2006. Three excluded the proper name "Muhammad" and referred to him by his title only, "the Prophet": "French Editor Fired over Cartoons" 2006; "Anger Grows over Muhammad Cartoon" 2006; "Italy Cartoon Row Minister Quits" 2006.
2. "Tensions Rise in Denmark-Iran Row" 2006; "Cartoon Clashes Claim Afghan Life" 2006; "Nigerian MPs Burn Denmark's Flag" 2006; "Danes Seek to Quell Cartoon Fury" 2006; "World Figures Deplore Cartoon Row" 2006; "Clinton Says Cartoons 'A Mistake'" 2006.
3. These include Plates XVIIIa and XVIIIb, XIXa and XIXb, XXa and XXb, XXXIII, XXXVb, and LIII.
4. For further information on Islamic art in general, see Brend (1991).
5. The implications are so far from the image of the "historical" Muhammad, even as described by objective non-Muslim scholars, that they may be tantamount to libel. If the imagery were translated into text and Muhammad were alive today and sued for libel, there would not be a court in Europe that would find the defendant cartoonists innocent.
6. Very little information exists regarding the actual birth. There is some information in Matthew 1 and 2 as well as Luke 1 and 2 regarding events before or after the birth, but the immaculate conception itself is not described at all. Matthew 1:25 glosses over the birth proceeding from prior to the event to after the fact. Luke 2:7 merely states matter

of factly that Mary gave birth to a son. By contrast, the *Qur'an* (19: 23–26) includes a description of the actual birth and even the newborn Jesus' conversation with his traumatized mother. Moreover, in the Arabic text of the *Qur'an* (19: 16–34), Mary's physical, psychological, and emotional trauma immediately prior to, during, and immediately following the birth are described with emotional intensity that contrasts starkly the relatively sterile historical style of the presentation in the Biblical text.

7. The original article, including all images, is available at the Jyllands-Posten Web site (http://epaper.jp.dk/30-09-2005/demo/JP_04-03.html).
8. In addition, Cagle's collection of political cartoons on the subject is available at: <http://www.cagle.com/news/PedophilePriests/1.asp>
9. In addition, Cagle's collection of political cartoons on the subject is available at <http://www.cagle.com/news/PedophilePriests/1.asp>
10. Mere mention of the above statement was enough to irk some readers of drafts of this article. How much more offensive would an image be?

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