

# Jyllands-Posten and the Otherization of Europe's Muslims

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I have been greatly troubled by the global strife surrounding the publication by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* of their now infamous cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad last year. I am an American Muslim of Danish descent with particularly close ties to Denmark (to the extent of carrying both nations' passports). My father and mother, a Bostonian and a *Københavnner* (Copenhagener) respectively, each embraced Islam and then met and married through a mutual Pakistani friend before my birth in the early 1970s. Contrary to the perception of liberal Scandinavia as the antithesis of traditional Islamic values, growing up as a Muslim in the USA I took great pride in Denmark's enlightened social and political traditions, considering them in important respects more Islamic than those of "religious" America during the Reagan era.

I am not unaware of the need for political reform in Islamic societies or indifferent to the perils posed by a failure to integrate Western Muslims into their societies, nor do I deny that the twin freedoms of speech and religion are a *sine qua non* of a healthy and free modern society. I confidently contend that these supposedly "secular" values are clearly enshrined in the Quran and Islamic tradition, regardless of whether all Muslims today realize this fact. Thus, for me there is no question that wherever they may be, Muslims must tolerate the expression in the public square of other perspectives on matters of faith, including theirs, and even when they find them offensive.

Two decades ago, I was passionately arguing for Salman Rushdie's right to publish his novel, *The Satanic Verses*. While I affirmed the legitimacy of Muslims voicing their umbrage at the book's seemingly offensive message, I also found many of the campaigns waged in the "defense" of Islam on this occasion gross overreactions and, in some cases, tragic betrayals of basic Islamic principles of freedom. To update Voltaire's famous dictum, I despised much of what Rushdie wrote, but would have waged jihad to defend his right to do so.

## Double Standards and Biased Coverage

Contrary to the rhetoric of some *Jyllands-Posten* defenders, the cartoon imbroglio bears little resemblance to the Rushdie case in either its essentials or political import. The problem is that stark double standards, ulterior motives, and nativist agendas have been on conspicuous display, things which call into question the commitment of Denmark, and ultimately Europe at large, to timeless

principles of equality, freedom, tolerance and respect for diversity.

It is important to remember that in some respects this controversy is not about the cartoons themselves. While some of the cartoons were indeed inherently offensive to Muslim sensibilities, most were relatively mild, and even in the case of the infamous image portraying Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, what offends most is ultimately the evident *intention to offend* as opposed to the cartoon's actual content. Their political context and the way they were designed from the outset to provoke are what really fueled this conflict.

As extreme and disturbing as some – though by no means all, or even most – Muslims' reactions have been to the Danish cartoons, the lion's share of blame for this senseless conflict lies at the feet of decision-makers at *Jyllands-Posten* and in Copenhagen. Given the steady (and internationally lamented) rise of xenophobia and Muslim-bashing in contemporary Danish society and given the provocative and humiliating manner the newspaper approached the matter, cross-communal strife was all but foreordained. As one US-based Danish expatriate put it bluntly, "The Danish paper that printed the cartoons wanted to stir up trouble – and the government wanted a culture war. They got more than they bargained for" (Klausen 2006). The real surprise of this conflict is that, unlike in most cases of immigrant-baiting in Denmark in recent years, here the victims did not stand alone. For once, a price was exacted for the depressingly common spectacle of vilifying Danish Muslims.

That is not to say that the only villains in this sordid saga were Danes or non-Muslims. The controversy has been eagerly exploited by a host of unsavory elements in the Muslim world, and violent crimes have been committed. Regimes with dubious credentials as defenders of Islamic values or religious freedom eagerly seized upon the conflict as a means to posture before their outraged populations, and regional extremists have fanned popular anger to undermine local authorities.

However, the Danish imams that have been so mercilessly pilloried in the Danish and international media are a far more complex story. In an exhaustive study of the causes of the cartoon crisis that was recently published, Danish historian Rune Engelbreth Larsen and Tøger Seidenfaden, editor-in-chief of the Danish daily *Politiken*, debunk the conventional wisdom in the Western media with a sustained analysis of the evidence that refutes most of these charges (Larsen & Seidenfaden 2006). It turns out that the delegation of Danish Muslims led by Imam Abu Laban that traveled to the Middle East at the end of 2005 to internationalize the debate played, despite some the initial missteps, a surprisingly *constructive* role in the conflict. The most striking and significant example is how the delegation did not appreciably contribute to the escalation of the conflict, as so many have charged. In fact, the Danish imams played a crucial moderating role by arguing *against* a boycott at various junctures. The authors contend there is "much evidence" that the imams' diplomatic efforts delayed the outbreak of a boycott

in the Middle East by over a month, until after their return to Denmark. Indeed, the imams' repeated calls for dialogue while in the region brought them effusive praise from a top Danish counterterrorism official in March 2006 (Larsen & Seidenfaden 2006: 183).

Of course, nothing justifies the exaggerations, inconsistencies or rhetorical excesses of some fringe Muslim leaders, but to demand that Danish Muslims scrupulously observe the Queensbury Rules at a time when they and their religion are being openly ridiculed on multiple fronts is naïve in the extreme. Moreover, to make such a demand of them when many of their opponents exhibit no such compunctions, freely heaping invective and innuendo on Danish Muslims, is ultimately to pick a side in the conflict rather than report on it.

It is quite disconcerting to consider how readily the Danish and international media accepted such inflammatory and biased accusations against the imams (and by extension all Danish Muslims) without sufficient proof. Unfortunately, much of the international media readily enlisted in the backlash and scapegoating campaign waged against Denmark's already beleaguered Muslim community.

### Otherization of Muslims

Shakespeare observed that "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." This caveat applies doubly today, as we live in a day when liberal values of equality and tolerance are so ingrained into modern political discourse that even bigots must clothe their machinations against minorities with sanctimonious pieties about fairness, women's rights, and other civic virtues. Today, villains invariably appeal to the modern "scripture" of egalitarianism and freedom while at the same time marginalizing, stigmatizing, and ostracizing those who supposedly do not share these values.

The most insidious result is the *Otherization* of Europe's Muslims so that discussions of them and their problems are no longer imbued with a commonsensical awareness of their shared humanity. As the late Edward Said noted, when Islam is considered "[t]he norms of rational sense are suspended" (Said 1997: xix). More and more, Muslims are treated as fundamentally *Other*—beings "outside the known, familiar, acceptable world that we inhabit" (ibid.: xxx) who are "doomed to rage and irrationalism" (ibid.: xxxiii). Bruce Lawrence laments the "dominant stereotype [that]...Muslims are intrinsically prone to violence" (Lawrence 1998: 4). In short, as Europe's Muslims become *otherized*, they cease to be understood as fellow human beings with normal desires, hopes, and values.

In a similar vein, Henry Louis Gates has observed that "the terms of the argument about the 'Muslim factor' are reminiscent of the language in which the 'Jewish question' was debated in England a century and a half ago" (qtd. in Vertovec & Peach 1997: 5). Indeed, Larsen has noted the striking parallels between the comments of prominent rightwing Danish politician Mogens Camre concerning

Muslims today and Joseph Goebbels' odious pronouncements on "the Jews" in Germany during the Nazi era (Larsen 2001: 144-146).

Under the guise of "honest" discussions of cultural differences, the hate of the past is making a comeback. Unscientific beliefs in the racial hierarchy of 19<sup>th</sup> century Social Darwinism that legitimized ethical abominations such as slavery and colonialism that are slowly being rehabilitated today in the public square through Islamophobic hysteria. Instead of discussing Muslims and their problems in their historical context as one does with other kinds of people, many resort to essentializing bromides about the "Muslim mind" or "Muslim culture" that imply Muslims to be alien to the ways of the civilized West. Such anachronistic thinking encourages fatalism and inaction among all parties and, most critically, it banishes *context* – the most fundamental of all sources of insight into human behavior – from the debate, leaving public opinion vulnerable to scaremongering peddlers of self-fulfilling prophecies of communal strife.

A corollary of the process of otherization of Muslims is the widespread neglect by journalists of local socio-political circumstances surrounding conflicts involving them. Thus, relatively few observers make the connection between *Jyllands-Posten's* confrontation with Muslims and the disturbing phenomenon of open xenophobia and socially sanctioned prejudice seen in Danish politics today. Larsen has carefully chronicled the journey of Denmark's immigrant-baiting far right from the ignominious political wilderness in the mid-1980s to respectability and influence in the late 1990s, and to a point where mainstream parties are openly incorporating their policies. Already in 1997, it had reached a point where a major conservative German newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, declared that the troubling schemes of Austrian fascist leader Jörg Haider were "state policy in Denmark" (Larsen 2001a: 187).

### Populist Xenophobia and Jyllands-Posten

That was a decade ago, and by most accounts, the Danish political scene has only become yet more contentious and anti-immigrant. Today, the Danish People's Party (DPP), a party known for its extreme immigrant rhetoric – to the extent that the Danish Supreme Court ruled in 2003 its leader Pia Kjaersgaard guilty of promoting racism – is the third largest party in Parliament, a member of the governing coalition, and ideological trendsetter on matters of immigration for the major parties. DPP politicians regularly fill the media with outrageous observations disparaging immigrants – such as calling Danish Muslims "cancers" and "rapists" – slurs which the major parties have often passed over in silence.

Another important blot on international coverage has been the tendency to uncritically take at face value claims to objectivity and purely idealistic motivations by parties active in the conflict. Given the considerable evidence of partisanship on the part of *Jyllands-Posten*, there are grounds for suspecting this to be

less a high-minded campaign for civil rights than a political campaign by nationalists to put Danish Muslims in their “place” and provoke conflicts guaranteed to deepen the already yawning gulf between Muslim and non-Muslim in Denmark (not to mention set the stage for future gains for the far right at the polls). For example, few journalists have highlighted how instrumental *Jyllands-Posten* has been to the rise of the far right in Denmark over the last two decades. *Jyllands-Posten* is by no means *Der Stürmer*, but it has long rallied anti-immigrant sentiment with dire warnings of the imminent demise of the Danish identity. The paper also distinguished itself through its enthusiastic support for Søren Krarup, the philosophical founder of the Danish far right, at a time other major media gave him a wide berth (Gaasholt & Tøgeby 1995: 157-158). Similarly, *Jyllands-Posten* cultural editor Fleming Rose happens to be a declared admirer of the noted American Muslim basher Daniel Pipes.

Even more disturbingly, the author Kåre Bluitgen – whose purported difficulties in finding artists to illustrate his children’s book on the Prophet Muhammad allegedly inspired Rose’s curious test of free speech – happens to be a critic of Islam and immigrants so shrill that he in 2002 infamously suggested that the Quran be publicly “splashed with menstrual blood” because of how hopelessly backward and sexist Muslims supposedly are.

It is also noteworthy that *Jyllands-Posten* has a decidedly mixed record of defending free speech on matters of religion: In 2003, a *Jyllands-Posten* editor rejected a relatively benign parody of Jesus Christ popping from a hole on the occasion of Easter, noting that his decision resulted from fears that such a cartoon might “provoke an outcry” from Christian readers (Fouché 2006). More thought provoking still, in 1984 *Jyllands-Posten* led the hue and cry against a controversial mural of a naked Christ by an iconoclastic artist, in the process going so far as to mock concerns about censorship (Omdal 2006; Larsen and Seidenfaden 2006: 263). *Jyllands-Posten* seems to treat Islam and Muslims by a special standard.

### Ignoring the Danish Context?

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the rhetoric of the cartoons’ defenders – and the most egregious failure of much international media coverage of the controversy – is the failure to acknowledge the threatening backdrop in which these cartoons appeared. The implicit assumption – that these highly confrontational cartoons were merely an attempt to somehow restore the “balance” to the debate on Islam and censorship – overlooks how relentlessly negative and in some cases dehumanizing the discussion in Denmark has become to Muslims. Even a decade ago in less conflict-ridden times, the Danish researchers Østein Gaasholt and Lise Tøgeby observed tellingly:

It is evident that groups highly hostile to immigrants have won not only the battle for media coverage but also the battle to define the metaphors and symbols affecting the debate. The debate has revolved around opportunistic refugees, 'Khomeinization,' forced marriages, child brides, ritual slaughters, lacking Danish language skills, drug crime, ghettos and the imposition of refugees on unwilling communities.

(Gaasholt & Togeby 1995: 161, my translation)

This, not a cerebral discussion of freedom, is the true context of the cartoons. There is a rising tide of fear and prejudice in Danish life that is a far greater and more immediate threat to civic peace than occasional self-censorship. In light of all this, there seem to be compelling reasons to assume that the cartoons were less an idealistic campaign than a calculated political move, the latest campaign by hard-liners to further isolate an already marginalized and vulnerable minority. If this is indeed the explanation, for such a nativist backlash to be touted as a high-minded defense of free speech truly adds insult to injury. It is essential that international observers not worsen the problem by endorsing one side's inevitably tendentious narrative in such a complex conflict.

Some aspects of this controversy are undoubtedly unique to Denmark, but the issues raised are of relevance to all countries struggling to balance the contemporary world's bewildering diversity with the modern nation state's imperatives of political unity and social integration. More importantly, and without endorsing the repugnant "Eurabia" hysteria one hears at times, there is reason to suspect that the civic growing pains being experienced by Denmark also await other European societies as popular attitudes polarize and communal cleavages become increasingly pronounced across the continent. My hope is that, next time around, the international media will be more cognizant of the risk of being co-opted in support of the campaigns of the powerful against the powerless when they fail to independently assess partisan claims before entering the fray.

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