

MARCH 2006

Virtue In Action

Examining Freedom of Speech in the Wake of the Mohammad Cartoons

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



WHEN WE THINK OF CARTOONS, WE OFTEN THINK OF DRAWINGS THAT SPARK LAUGHTER. INSTEAD, THE CARTOONS PUBLISHED BY DANISH NEWSPAPER JYLLANDS-POSTEN ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2005 IGNITED VIOLENT PROTESTS ACROSS THE MUSLIM WORLD, RESULTING IN THE DEATHS OF AT LEAST 45.

When we think of cartoons, we often think of drawings that spark laughter. Instead, the cartoons published by Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on September 30, 2005 ignited violent protests across the Muslim world, resulting in the deaths of at least 45. The drawings depict the prophet Mohammad. Many Muslims consider *any* physical representation of Islam's prophet **blasphemous**, and some of the caricatures portrayed Mohammad in a disrespectful manner. One of the cartoons linked Mohammad directly to terrorism, showing the prophet wearing a bomb-shaped turban with a lit fuse. "I cannot describe how hurt I feel. The Prophet Muhammad is not only the prophet we follow, but he is dearer to us than our own selves," said Wael Ibrahim, an Egyptian sales manager living in China.

While the initial printing of the cartoons was contained to Denmark, it was the reprinting months later that sparked protests across the Muslim world. Examining the reasons behind the unexpected series of events teaches us valuable lessons about the interactions between valued rights such as freedom of speech, and virtues such as respect for others and responsibility. It also causes us to consider the realities of living in a global community.

How it all started

It all started when Flemming Rose, culture editor of the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten*, wanted to combat what he saw as a sense of self censorship in Denmark, where writers and artists have become increasingly afraid and reluctant to take on issues that may be offensive to Muslims. Rose asked cartoonists to "draw the Prophet as they saw him."

Danish Muslim leaders were outraged by the cartoons that followed and organized a demonstration. Many asked for an apology, but *Jyllands-Posten* editor-in-chief Carsten Juste replied, "We live in a democracy. **Satire** is accepted in this country, and you can make caricatures." He added "Religion shouldn't set any barriers on that sort of expression." On October 17, only a few weeks later, six of the cartoons were reprinted in an Egyptian newspaper *Al-Fagr*. The paper seemed intent on stirring things up, predicting that the drawings would insult all Muslims. But Muslim response was virtually unnoticeable. After three days, eleven ambassadors of Muslim countries requested a meeting with Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who refused to meet. The President of the European Network against Racism, Bashy Quraishy, responded, "I have never in my long



An Afghan boy cries for help after he got caught in barbed wire outside a U.S. military base during a demonstration by Muslim protesters in Kabul, Afghanistan, Monday, Feb. 6, 2006. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

political career heard of a group of diplomats asking for a meeting on such an important subject and being refused."

Fanning the Flames

Soon after, Danish Muslim activists launched their own campaign to publicize the cartoon issue in the Middle East. They met with leading Islamic scholars and political leaders, taking a 43-page **dossier** containing the 12 cartoons plus three more **inflammatory** drawings that had not been published. They used these as examples of the insults endured by Muslims in Denmark, although the most insulting drawing -- depicting Mohammad with the face of a pig -- was actually a photograph of a pig-squealing contest winner.

These cartoons and pictures were now quickly being distributed and described throughout the Muslim world. Reaction began to take a violent turn. On January 30 gunmen took over European Union offices in Gaza, demanding an apology for the cartoons. Carsten Juste, editor-in-chief at *Jyllands-Posten*, then posted an apology on the paper's website, "In our opinion, the 12 drawings were sober. They were not intended to be offensive, nor were they at variance with Danish law, but they have indisputably offended many Muslims for which we apologize." The Danish Prime Minister welcomed the apology, while also defended freedom of speech.

Other newspaper and magazine editors throughout Europe then sought to affirm their right of freedom of speech and reprinted the cartoons. Many Muslims viewed this reprinting as a further insult, generating widespread calls within the Muslim world for further violent and peaceful protests.

Views of European Editors

European editors published the cartoons as an expression of support for the right of free speech, which is a pillar of free society and enshrined in the **U.S. Constitution's First Amendment**. Munira Mirza, a commentator on multicultural issues and "Islamophobia", illustrated this point stating, "No matter the price, the principle of freedom must be defended. Unless we stand up for freedom of speech, we are unable to engage freely and hold belief systems - of all kinds - to account." The Western world has fought hard to earn free speech. Thus, for some it is as sacred as religious images or the Prophet Muhammad. "We are living in a secular society where even religion can be subjected to criticism and satire," said Roger Koppel, the editor of the German newspaper *Die Welt*. "It's not acceptable in a western country, if you publish a cartoon like this, that the newspaper has to apologize, or even the prime minister has to apologize."

Respect for Others

Freedom of speech is important, and is a pillar of the democracies in the Western World. At the same time, the cartoon controversy illustrates that there needs to be a balance of judgment in wielding this freedom. Many leaders including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and President Bush commented that free speech must be exercised with respect for others in acknowledging the dignity of the religious beliefs of others, even if we disagree with them. By directly connecting Muhammad to terrorism, many believe the newspapers showed a lack of respect for Muslims beliefs.

A major Christian leader, Pope Benedict XVI, said "It is necessary and urgent that religions and their symbols are respected, and that believers are not the object of provocations that harm their progress and their religious feelings." He also emphasized that violence is never a justifiable response to offenses.

Respect for others doesn't mean that we can't criticize or disagree with others, thus, **patronizing** others by being afraid to insult them. On the contrary, in a free world this is what keeps things in check. Respect for others does, however, guide us on how/how not to engage a discussion. Part of acknowledging the dignity and value of others is refraining in our speech from using insults of another person's culture and beliefs. Insulting another person or culture rarely helps us to resolve or to constructively engage a problem or issue.

In the present controversy, we should ask whether insulting Muslim religious beliefs helped to resolve the issue the Danish editor was first concerned about - that the press in Denmark was afraid to raise difficult issues with the Muslim community. UN Secretary General



Supporters of a Pakistani opposition party take part in a rally to condemn the publication of cartoons depicting Islamic Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper, Sunday, Feb. 12, 2006 in Peshawar, Pakistan. (AP Photo/Muhammad Zubair)

Riots and death around the world

Over the next several weeks, mobs and protesters in Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Libya attacked Danish, Norwegian and Italian embassies. Crowds in Afghanistan, looking to strike out at any symbol of the West, tried to break into the bases of international peacekeeping troops. In Northern Nigeria protestors attacked 11 Christian churches, severely beat and killed Christians. In Pakistan protestors attacked businesses owned by Western companies. Police trying to control the crowds killed several protestors, while shots fired by protestors themselves killed others. In many of the protests, the mobs chanted for and displayed signs calling for the killing of those responsible for the cartoons.

Some Muslim leaders encouraged peaceful protests and in addition, organized boycotts of Danish products sold throughout the Muslim world. The boycotts sent a powerful message back to Denmark as their companies lost significant revenue.

Kofi Annan commented, “The republication of the cartoons, and the support for them voiced by some leaders in Europe, have strengthened those in the Muslim world who see Europe, or the West as a whole, as irredeemably hostile to Islam and encourage Muslims to always see themselves as victims.”

Inconsistencies on all sides

The Muslims protesting the publishing of the cartoons are demanding that their religious beliefs be respected. However in some of these same Muslim countries, their governments severely restrict and even outlaw the free exercise of religions other than Islam. In addition, in many Muslim countries one can easily find newspapers, magazines and books that promote hatred and show disrespect toward Judaism and the West in general. Many commentators have also pointed out that it is difficult to fully accept the protestors’ demands for respect when the protestors themselves have shown they do not respect the property, religious symbols and even the lives of others.

There are also inconsistencies within the European nations proclaiming their right of free speech. Within many European nations it is against the law to deny the existence of the Holocaust, which killed over 6 million Jews. It is also illegal in some of these nations to make statements that promote hatred toward other groups. Some Muslim commentators point out that some European laws seem to go to great lengths toward protecting Jews from false statements and hate speech, while looking the other way with speech that offends some Muslims.

Responsibility in a global community

Our nation’s founders spoke of the reality that with freedom and rights come responsibility – accepting our duty as citizens to use our freedom to promote doing what we *ought* to do, not only doing what we *can* do. Our responsibilities also encompass **prudence** in assessing the potential consequences of our actions. President Bush referred to this: “We also recognize that with freedom comes responsibilities...to be thoughtful

to others.” Being thoughtful of others in assessing the consequences of our statements requires that we know the culture, perspectives and values of people of other nations and religious beliefs.

Stewart Lee, the creator of *Jerry Springer - The Opera* commented, “This is one of the teething problems of the cross-over of cultures in the world.” Some of the editors didn’t fully appreciate the intensity of most Muslims’ beliefs -- that their religious beliefs are more important than anything else – and they didn’t consider the emotional response the cartoons would catalyze.”

On the other side, many Muslim protestors incorrectly assumed that since their governments control their nations’ newspapers and press, the views expressed by the Danish cartoons must reflect the official view of Denmark’s government. Many protestors also didn’t realize the role that humor and satire play in the Western press in addressing public policy issues.

U.S. Secretary of State Rice has also invoked the concept of responsibility in asking the leaders of Syria and Iran to be accountable for why they didn’t better protect the embassies of European nations. She believes that the leaders of these nations encouraged the violent protests, and hence share in the responsibility for the destruction that followed.

The destruction and death resulting from a series of cartoons reminds us that messages and ideas are important, especially in an increasingly global community where technology enables our actions to have a significant impact on others living far away. We have also seen that misunderstandings can lead to tragic unintended consequences, especially if parties on both sides choose to escalate instead of engaging in constructive dialogue. Freedom of speech is indeed a pillar of democracy and should be affirmed. However, so that our rights may be used to promote the good, we should always consider how to balance our rights with respect for others and a sense of responsibility and duty as citizens of free nations.

Vocabulary

Blasphemous - being very irreverent

Dossier - A collection of papers giving detailed information about a particular person or subject.

Inflammatory- tending to cause anger or animosity

Patronizing - treating others as though they are inferior

Prudence - thinking through the potential consequences of one’s actions ahead of time

Satire - A literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit
1st Amendment to the U.S.

Constitution - “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

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HIGHLIGHTED VIRTUES

Empathy – Entering into the feelings or spirit of others; imagining yourself in another person’s situation.

Prudence – thinking through the potential consequences of one’s actions ahead of time

Responsibility – accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable

Respect for Others – showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by “the golden rule”: do unto others as you would want done unto you

LESSON GOALS

- To help students understand the right of freedom of speech and its value in the exchange of ideas, in citizens having input into government, and in holding institutions and ideas accountable
- Understand the virtues of respect for others, responsibility, and prudence
- Appreciate that rights and freedom go hand in hand with responsibility
- Understand and appreciate the interactions and potential conflicts among rights, responsibilities, and respect for others
- Evaluate the arguments for and against freedom of the press
- To build awareness of the reality that we live in a global community, and to realize the importance of understanding other peoples’ cultures and perceptions
- Develop awareness of how the choice for violence can often have unanticipated and harmful consequences
- Encourage consideration and discussion among students of how in their communities and peer groups they balance rights with responsibilities and respect for others

DISCUSSION QUESTION OPTIONS:

1. As the controversy over the cartoons evolved, what do you think were some of the mistakes made that resulted in further escalation and violence? *(please list these on the board)*

How could some of the virtues we have



studied offset some of the problems identified on the board? *(Here we hope students will apply virtues such as respect for others, responsibility, dialogue and striving for mutual understanding)*

2. The publishing of the cartoons was motivated by the sense of the Danish editor that professionals in their nation’s media were censoring themselves with regard to speaking about Muslims in their community. Do you think that publishing the cartoons was an effective way to engage this discussion and debate? What would have been other options to engage this issue?
3. From a Muslim perspective, do you think depicting the prophet Mohammad with a bomb for a turban is insulting,

and demanded a response? If yes, what response do you think would be most appropriate and effective?

4. The other European papers and magazines published the cartoons after seeing the violent reaction of the Muslim protestors. What were their reasons for republishing and not republishing the cartoons? As an editor of another European paper what would you have done?
5. Why is freedom of speech important to a democracy?
6. Do you think there should be any limits in the practice of free speech, if yes, why? What limits exist on free speech in America today and why? *(Some examples are yelling “fire” in a movie theater, and speech that inspires actual violence.)*
7. Among our friends and within our school communities do you think we practice our freedom of speech with respect for others, and a sense of responsibility for the impact of what we say?
8. Are there typical situations in our own lives where misunderstandings of another person’s perceptions can lead to assumptions and then statements that end up being harmful and even lead to violence? *(this could be the basis for a writing exercise)*

Continued on back

JOURNAL WRITING OPTIONS:

1. Think of a person at school who you don't get along with. Think of two or three things you can do to get along better, and write those ideas down. (I.e. say something nice, offer them a snack, offer a smile, or by just making an effort to say hello). Write down any other ideas you have, considering what life may be like for them (maybe they're struggling with their grades or sports).
2. This lesson has several different quotes from world leaders – religious and political – stating that great care should be exercised when practicing free speech. At the same time, they have said violence is not an appropriate reaction to insult. Think of a time that you have been personally and deeply insulted. If you can't think of a time, imagine if there were a time. Write about how you felt – or would feel? Did you or would you retaliate? What was the outcome? How would you handle the same situation again in the future?

EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. Organize the class into teams to research the First Amendment. The links below provide a good starting point. Each team will make a presentation on one of the following topics:
 - What were the motivating factors behind the creation of the Bill of Rights?
 - What is the freedom of speech and the press, and why is it important for our democracy and nation?
 - What is the freedom of religion, and why is it important for our democracy and nation?
 - What is the right of the people to assemble peaceably, and to petition the government for the redress of grievances? Why are these important for our democracy and nation?

- Each team presenting on a right can also discuss a couple of major Supreme Court cases related to their assigned right.
2. Divide the class into three groups for a debate. Have one team defend the position of the editors who decided to publish the cartoons. Team two should defend the position of the Muslim leaders calling for protests. Team three should advocate for freedom of speech but advocating that the editors should have chosen themselves to not publish the cartoons.
 3. Pick a local editor of a newspaper or magazine and invite that person to come speak to the class on the topic of Freedom of Speech, and what they would have done as an editor of a major European paper in deciding whether to publish the cartoons.

INTERNET RESOURCES

[http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/First_ amendment](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/First_amendment)

First Amendment, Law Review

<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/>

First Amendment Web Site

<http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html>

US Constitution Web Site

<http://www.jp.dk/udland/artikel:aid=3544992:fid=11328/>

Jyllands-Posten website and apology