

Danish Cartoons ? __Expression of Freedom or Abuse of Speech?

by Dr. Habib Siddiqui

In recent days, since the publication of the racist, Islamophobic, utterly despicable and offensive cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad sallal-lahu alayhi wa-sallam (S) in a Danish newspaper, many other newspapers across Europe and America have joined the fray as what they disingenuously claim as 'demonstrations of freedom of __expression.?'It;/FONT>[1] Naturally, when protests across the Muslim world became louder and some Muslim governments decided to pull off Danish products from their market, Europe appeared to be stunned by such reactions.

In her latest column, Trudy Rubin of the Philadelphia Inquirer writes on February 12, 2006: "Global protests over the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad have sparked debate over the limits to press freedom in the West.?'In a separate column, Jonathan Last, finds the western attitude in denouncing the cartoons as 'smacks of paternalism.?'He opines that those cartoons, much like the tortures in Abu Ghraib prison, do not represent western attitude towards Muslims and the latter are capable of making the distinction between reprehensible acts of the few and the government. Evidently he does not like western apologies for such crimes.

Shortly after the recent controversy surfaced, in al-Jazeera website, a Dane wrote, "No authority in the Danish State is responsible for written and spoken ideas from any free citizen not working for the State ?nor either a stupid cartoon drawing. The cartoon drawer and the newspaper should be the ones to blame ?there is a long tradition in Denmark of not making censorship before news is being published and that the government has nothing to do with such anti-Islamic cartoons."

An underlying assumption, often repeated by many westerners, is that it was all about freedom of press. I beg to differ with such an assertion. The cartoon controversy has little to do with freedom. Even the most diehard fanatic of freedom would agree that there is a limit to everything, including freedom. With freedom comes responsibility. So when my fist hits someone, it becomes violence and not freedom. In a civil society, Government essentially enacts laws to stop such violence.

Government is a voice of the people, albeit the majority, in a democratic society. So, when a democratic government commits crime, it is often a reflection of its people's attitude to condone such crimes. [This statement may sound strange, but examples are plenty to prove the case.] It is, therefore, not surprising to find how certain war-criminals get reelected even when their horrendous crimes are widely known.

Background on Cartoon Controversy:

The offensive cartoons in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten (JP), and reproduced later in other parts of the world, are a demonstrations of those countries?attitude towards Muslims. It has been quite sometime that Danish and Scandinavian newspaper editors are on record stating that they published the cartoons as an act of defiance against 'radical Islam.?'It;/FONT>[2] In

April of last year, the queen of Denmark was quoted by the Telegraph newspaper of UK as saying that Danes should show their 'opposition to Islam.'^[3] She said, "We are being challenged by Islam these years globally as well as locally. It is a challenge we have to take seriously. We have to show our opposition to Islam and we have to, at times, run the risk of having unflattering labels placed on us because there are some things for which we should display no tolerance."

With such a xenophobic and bigoted statement, it was left to the media to display their 'opposition' to Islam. And what could be more hurtful to Muslims than offensive cartoons of their Prophet? After all, there is no figure more venerated by Muslims than that of their Prophet Muhammad (S)! His is the most popular name on earth. Each time a Muslim takes his name, he supplicates (du'a) "sallal-lahu alayhi wa-sallam," meaning -- May Allah's blessings and peace be upon him. No Muslim prayer is complete without such supplications. No wonder that his grave is the most visited grave on earth!

One should not, therefore, be surprised at the Muslim reaction to those insulting cartoons. In their protests and anger, they simply have exhibited their freedom of expression and human feelings, of which they have every right. In the post-9/11 era of global crusade against Muslims and malicious campaigns against Islam, it does not take a rocket scientist to understand that offensive caricatures of the Prophet of Islam were bound to enrage Muslims.

There is no denying that there are some active and dangerous groups, mostly led by the western neoconservative ideologues, which want to exploit the post-9/11 condition to bring about their desired 'clash of civilizations.' But how can you fight when your opponent does not want to fight and tries to get away from your marauding path? So, the strategy has been to enrage the opponent. And in this, sadly, these warmongers are succeeding. They have found a natural ally among the ill-equipped, disgruntled and nihilist Zarqawis among Muslims.

It is worth noting that in the global arena, Muslims have not been setting their agenda for many decades. Following Newton's third law, they only **react** to the criminal manipulations of the western powers and their ideologues. The cartoon controversy is the latest of that criminal ploy. It further demonizes Muslims and, in turn, sets them on a collision course with a much superior force that is savage and immoral. It also hinders them from their much needed house-cleaning (C.O.P.S.) task in their own nation-states.

Here are some more facts about the cartoon controversy: Last autumn JP assigned 40 prominent Danish caricaturists to draw the Prophet Muhammad (S). Twelve responded and the results were published on September 30. The project was deliberately designed to provoke Muslims. According to Flemming Rose, JP's cultural editor, the project was aimed at "testing the limits of self-censorship in Danish public opinion." My question is: why then the paper previously rejected cartoons about Jesus? Was it for anything other than the realization that such cartoons would provoke an outcry within its Christian readers?^[4] Recently, it again refrained from (and rightly so) offensive cartoons against Jews. So, why this charade about testing the limits of self-censorship in public opinion! Through its very bigoted action, this right-wing paper has demonstrated that such nonsensical tests are only reserved for Muslims. It is no fluke that the paper is infamous for its declarations of support for

the Nazis in the 1930s. In recent years, it has played a key role in Denmark's current shift to the reactionary Right. We are, therefore, not surprised to learn that when Rose visited Philadelphia, he had met neocon ideologue Pipes (known for anti-immigrant paranoia and Islamophobia), and wrote very favorably.

Rose says: "In a secular society, Muslims have to live with the fact of being ridiculed, scoffed at and made to look ridiculous. In a crude, racist stereotype, one cartoon, in particular, depicted Muhammad (S) as a terrorist. The obvious implication is that every Muslim is a potential terrorist, thereby seeding Islamophobia in the minds of everyone.

Soon after publication of these cartoons, the right-wing Danish prime minister was approached by concerned Danish Muslims. But Andres Fogh Rasmussen ignored them. He also turned down appeals by concerned Arab ambassadors for talks to clarify the issue. When 22 former Danish ambassadors appealed to the prime minister to hold discussion with representatives of Islamic states, he rejected their appeal and bullied that "freedom of the press" could not be a topic for diplomatic discussion.

Rasmussen has been deceitful. He is a racist and a bigot. His coalition government includes right-wing neo-liberals and neocons, together with the Nazi-like xenophobic Danish People's Party. The latter rose to notoriety in the 1990s when all the bourgeois parties of Denmark (including the ruling Social Democrats) resorted to racist campaigns. The People's Party declared at the time that Islam was a "cancerous ulcer" and "terrorist movement." Its leader Pia Kjaersgaard, notorious for her racist rants and slurs, declared that the Islamic world could not be regarded as civilized. "There is only one civilization," she declared, "and that is ours." Rasmussen, as the leader of the right-wing Venstre party, adopted much of the racist demagoguery of the People's Party. [5]

In the election campaign of 2001, Rasmussen demanded that "criminal foreigners" be expelled from the country within 48 hours. His campaign utilized posters featuring pictures of Muslim criminals to suggest that all Muslims were violent. It was because of such anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant xenophobic campaign that Venstre won the election and was able to form a minority coalition government. Since coming to power, Denmark's immigration laws have been drastically tightened. [6] The country has troops in Iraq.

So it is not difficult to understand why Rasmussen's Denmark and JP are taking the lead in this latest savage attack on Islam. What is true about Denmark vis-à-vis the cartoon controversy is reflected in other parts of Europe! Time and again Europe has demonstrated that she is not ready for a genuine debate or dialogue of civilizations on a mature level. She craves for foul and mean things. She is not ready for pluralism or multi-culture. She remains true to her innate savage root.

Phony Talks of Tolerance and Freedom:

Europe talks about tolerance. But it has never been tolerant of others. It has presented us the Inquisition, Pogroms, Genocide and Holocaust, and continues to disgust us with newer gadgets and displays of mass murder, intolerance, bigotry and racism every now and then. Yes, the victims may now look different, but the art of dehumanization has not changed a bit. It is probably a little bit more sophisticated to mystify others. But just as they needed *Der Stürmer* before the Jewish Holocaust,

they now need those offensive Danish cartoons to prepare the ground ready for the third Muslim Holocaust in Europe (after Bosnia and Kosovo). If they are a tolerant bunch, why in recent days did they raze scores of Muslim shops, mosques and schools, even vandalize Muslim graves? What is more despicable than that?

Europe talks about freedom of speech, but she wastes no time to gang up on others?right to such expressions. If she really means freedom, why were her leaders irate about Iranian president's remarks about Israel, threatening to dismember Iran from the UN? Why do they arrest Muslims when they react verbally to criminal onslaught against them? Why is radical Muslim cleric Abu Hamza tried and jailed in Tony Blair's England for expressing his views? Why is it a crime in France, Germany and some other European states to express views that question the Holocaust? Why such selective use of law limiting the so-called freedom of speech when it comes to Holocaust but nonchalant about materials that are offensive to nearly one quarter of humanity? [*Lest you forget, I am against any forms of hate speech, publication, etc. that dehumanizes anyone.*]

If hate speech is undesirable, criminal and punishable (for its gross impact on the society), why were not the European leaders upset about scores of offensive remarks against Arabs made by Israeli leaders - from the past to the present? How about the xenophobic speeches by the European leaders, including those of the current Danish prime minister? How about publication of offensive materials that incites violent reactions, which almost always lead to death? [Scores of Muslims, including an 8-year old child, were killed by police. Why that Pakistani child had to die when he did not even participate in demonstration? Could he have lived if those Danish cartoons were not published? Should not the Danish government and the JP management be held responsible for aiding in the unlawful deaths of those civilians in Pakistan and Afghanistan?] Where was the application of the article of the Danish constitution that says - **"The law prohibits publicly disseminated statements, which threaten, insult, or degrade persons based on their religion?"** when it came to the obvious racist and bigoted message disseminated by the Danish cartoons? How about prosecuting the management of the JP according to the Danish Penal Code: Section 266b that states: **"Any person who publicly or with the intention of dissemination to a wide circle of people makes a statement or imparts other information threatening, insulting, or degrading a group of persons on account of their race, color, or national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years"?**

Why a different standard when it comes to Islam?

If the messengers of hatred, racism and bigotry are bad guys, why do Europeans continue to elect such monsters to head their governments? Why such an incongruity between what they say and what they do?

Am I surprised? No, I am not. I simply get amused with European creativity on how they reinvent themselves to mislead others! Their behavior can be summed by a single word: hypocrisy.

In case our European friends find the term foreign, here is an English definition from Mr. Webster. He defines hypocrisy as a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not. Hypocrite is one who affects virtues or qualities he does not have. In plain English, hypocrite is a person

who says something and does something contrary. The Prophet Muhammad (S) had a better definition when he said, "A hypocrite has three distinguishing signs: first when he talks, he lies; second when he makes a promise, he breaks it; and third when something is entrusted to him, he misappropriates it." [Bukhari and Muslim: Abu Hurayrah (RA)]

How so appositely said from the fountainhead of Islamic wisdom!

Some Recommendations:

Muslim nation states should stop trading with all those European nations that encouraged the publication of those offensive, slanderous and racist cartoons. Obviously, Denmark should be on the top of that list.

The OIC should demand that the Danes responsible for the publication of those cartoons, which have resulted in deaths of many Muslims, be extradited and tried for causing sedition, death and violence in a Muslim court, appointed by the OIC. The trial would reciprocate already invoked western laws that demand extradition and trial of material witnesses and suspected terrorists.

The OIC should also demand that western countries enact laws that ban any form of bigotry and racism, failing which the OIC member states should not trade with them.

Here are my recommendations for Europe: Europeans need to shred their image as a hypocritical people. If they are genuinely offended by Holocaust-denials, they should equally be offended by any public exhibit of elements that are offensive to Muslims (and for that matter any religion or race). If they are irate about hate speeches, they should not allow the merchants of hate -- the publishers and writers who are doing Julius Streicher's demonic job today -- to spread hatred. They simply cannot pick and choose that epitomizes their unnerving hypocrisy. Nor can they hide behind laws that are hypocritical and racist to the core, and still claim to be civilized and rational. They also have to change their attitude on whole bunch of things in a world that is changing fast. They have to learn tolerance of 'other' people. They have to learn that with freedom comes responsibility. They have to debate what does those terms mean to them individually and collectively? In my humble opinion, they have mistakenly equated their promiscuity and sexual freedom/preference/perversion as symbols of their freedom and tolerance. They should know that liberalism does not necessarily translate into tolerance.

Lastly, let me state clearly that something that is offensive to someone cannot be good. Only a vulgar, mean-spirited, evil man takes delight at other's pain and suffering. True humanity is about compassion and respect for fellow beings, and providing protection against their sense of being violated. Such demands a feeling of shame and outrage with anything that is insulting to a fellow human being.

So, the civilized people of Europe should demand an apology from their press and government to the Muslim people (for the right reason and not political expediency). They should demand enacting laws, much like

what they did for the Holocaust-denial, banning and prosecuting merchants of hatred and bigotry. Anything short of these would only seal their identity as a hypocrite people. Let them reflect upon what the 13th century sage Shaykh Sa'di had said:

O thou whose interior is denuded of piety
But wearest outwardly the garb of hypocrisy
Do not display a curtain of seven colours.
Thou hast reed mats inside thy house.
- [Gulistan]

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[1] See, e.g., Trudy Rubin's column on February 5, 2006 in the Philadelphia Inquirer.

[2] See, e.g., Richard Itani's essay: "Cartoons and Hypocrisy?" in the www.counterpunch.org.

[3] See Tarek Mishkhas's essay: "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark," Arab News, 5 February, 2006.

[4] See the Guardian reporter filed by Gladys Fouche on the cartoon controversy. See also Siraj Wahab's piece: Danish paper rejected Jesus cartoons, Arab News, February 9, 2006.

[5] See Peter Schwarz's "Denmark and Jyllands-Posten: the background to a provocation," World Socialist Website, February 10, 2006.

[6] *ibid.*

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