

## Europe, Muslim Minorities and “Free Speech”

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In February, violent demonstrations across the Muslim world targeted Danish and European embassies. Demonstrators were protesting the publication last September by Denmark's largest paper, JYLLANDS-POSTEN, of a dozen caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, one of them wearing a turban shaped like a bomb with a fuse attached. Not only did these caricatures mock and stereotype an entire religion with 1.5 billion adherents; they also violated longstanding Muslim strictures against depicting Muhammad, considered a form of idolatry.

### DEMONSTRATIONS NOT SPONTANEOUS

These anti-cartoon demonstrations were hardly spontaneous, however. They occurred five months after the event. In addition, they seem to have been orchestrated at the Organization of Islamic Countries annual meeting in Mecca in December, which also called for a boycott of Danish goods. Authoritarian and unpopular Muslim rulers—from Egypt and Syria to Iran—were once again seeking to channel dissent and unrest outward, at the very time they were coming under popular pressure at home.

- In Damascus, where the security police normally forbid all demonstrations, thousands were able to take to the streets and burn the Danish and Norwegian embassies.
- In Beirut, demonstrators destroyed the Danish mission, as well as a Christian church.
- In Tehran, crowds were allowed to set fire to the Danish Embassy, also attacking the Austrian one. The ultra-reactionary President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, who has denied the Holocaust, issued a call for a contest of cartoons mocking the Holocaust.

- In Nigeria, some 100 died in clashes between Muslims and Christians. It began with a Muslim protest against the cartoons that attacked Christian communities and churches, which led to retaliation by Christian mobs against Muslim communities and mosques.

During the demonstrations, conservative newspapers in a number of European countries reprinted all or part of the offending cartoons. In the U.S., almost all major media refused to publish the cartoons, but several student newspapers did so, again in the name of “free speech.”

### **A FREE SPEECH ISSUE?**

On the surface, these events seemed to be a replay of previous controversies. In 1989, as he was dying, and at a time when the theocratic dictatorship he had founded was losing support, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the death of the Anglo-Indian Muslim writer Salman Rushdie, whose novel *THE SATANIC VERSES* had supposedly maligned the Prophet. Rushdie survived, but one of his translators was killed. In 1994, Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh drove Taslima Nasreen into exile, after the publication of her novel *SHAME*, a feminist critique of women’s rights under Islam.

Rushdie, Nasreen, and other intellectuals of Muslim origin have issued a statement defending the right of newspapers to publish the cartoons as a matter of free speech and as part of the struggle against religious fanaticism. One of the signers, Ibn Warraq, wrote in another article of “the inability of the West to defend itself,” and went on to praise the “civilizing” effects of the British in India.

In these pages we have frequently attacked Muslim fundamentalism. We have also defended secularism and women’s rights against Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Hindu fundamentalism. However, we think it is simplistic and even dangerous to view the current controversy as one primarily between free speech and religious fanaticism.

### **THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

Context is important here. Denmark has only 200,000 Muslims, many of them immigrants, among a population of 5.4 million. They constitute an easy and convenient target for a conservative newspaper like *JYLLANDS-POSTEN*. If it were really interested in promoting free speech, why did it refuse, on the grounds that this would “provoke an outcry,” to publish caricatures of the Resurrection of Jesus in 2003?

While the international media, dominated as they are by Western capital, have shown Muslim crowds as violent and bigoted, they have not covered the above facts very much. Nor have they covered the fact that the present Danish government survives due to the support of the Far-Right Danish People's Party (DPP), which won 13% of the vote in the last election. Under DPP pressure, funding has been eliminated for hundreds of groups that had aided immigrants. The government also made it much more difficult for Danes to marry foreigners, causing some to apply for citizenship in Sweden, where laws are less restrictive.

One DPP parliamentarian referred to "many points in common between Hitler and Islam." Another stated: "All the Western countries are being invaded by Muslims. Some of them speak politely, but they are waiting to become numerous enough to kill us." According to Bashy Quraishy, President of the European Network Against Racism, "No European Union country is as Islamophobic and xenophobic as is Denmark."

Given this context, we find ourselves in agreement with Germany's Nobel Laureate Günter Grass: "The drawings remind one of those published in a famous German newspaper during the time of the Nazis, DER STÜRMER. It published anti-Semitic caricatures in the same style."

When Jews ridicule Jewish culture, or Muslim intellectuals criticize fundamentalism, this is quite different from when the mass media—in countries where Christianity has been dominant—embark upon the ridicule and stereotyping of religious and ethnic minorities. The editors of JYLLANDS-POSTEN are not free speech heroes, but bigots and bullies, as much as is the Iranian president. If there are any free speech heroes in this controversy, they are the journalists in the Muslim world who are now in jail for having published some of the cartoons for the purpose of debate, or even for discussing them in a serious way.

### **THE DANGER**

In the period after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and even more so since September 11, 2001, reactionary political forces the world over have fanned the flames of religious and ethnic fanaticism. Ronald Reagan and Ayatollah Khomeini did so in the 1980s, as did George Bush and Osama Bin Laden after September 11. In the U.S., fundamentalist Christian preachers with White House access have reviled Islam. In more secular Western Europe, despite strong reservations about the U.S. invasion of Iraq, mainstream politicians regularly scapegoat immigrants, many of them Muslim, as the cause of crime and

unemployment. This has helped to prevent the anti-war movement from developing into a larger challenge to the system.

In the Middle Eastern and Muslim world, equally reactionary forces manipulate Islam for political ends. In many countries, these forces have replaced the leftist and nationalist parties in the articulation of anti-imperialist sentiment. With the rise of radical Islamism, women's rights and the most basic democracy, let alone the prospects for a truly emancipatory revolutionary movement, have been set back immeasurably.

The controversy over the anti-Muslim cartoons published in Europe has helped extremely reactionary forces in both Europe and the Muslim world to gain headway. This is a danger facing all progressive and revolutionary movements, in Europe, in the Muslim world, and globally.

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