

# The Cartoons Controversy and the Danish Press

Mustafa Hussain

- *On the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2005, the largest newspaper of Denmark, Jyllands-posten, published 12 defaming cartoons of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, which triggered worldwide Muslim protests against the paper and the government of Denmark for not openly condemning the symbolic vandalising of the holy icon of the second largest faith of the world after Christianity. By the end of January 2006 the protests turned into violent confrontations between the police and the angry mobs in many a Muslim countries in Asia and the Middle East resulting in the loss of life, attracting international media attention. This essay probes into the ensuing media coverage of the cartoons crisis in Denmark with the argument that the Muslims and their faith have been under attack by the Danish press long before the events of 9/11 and the international campaigns against the terrorist organisations. Both the spokespersons of the government and the press in general supported the free-speech rights of the newspaper, but undermined the emotional harm done to the Muslim sensitivities by blaming the protesting Muslims themselves of being irrational and ignorant of the values of an open society. The essay claims further that contrary to the rhetoric of the press, there is no absolute free expression as the values of free speech are often balanced against some other values to avoid harm to religious sensitivities of various faith communities. But the press applies different standards, when the targets of hate-speech are the Muslim communities.*

## Keywords

The press freedom, civic values, emotional harm, satire and vandalism, Islam, rationalism.

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The publication of caricature of Islam's prophet Mohammed on September the 30<sup>th</sup> 2005 by the largest Danish daily *Jyllands-posten* resulted in widespread Muslim protests across the Muslim countries with burning of Danish flag and attacks on Danish embassies. The Muslims world over were outraged with seeing one of the holiest icons of their faith being represented, among other degrading attributions, as a terrorist.

The ensuing debate in Denmark as elsewhere in the West remained mainly locked into a single issue of the Western values of free-speech versus lack of democratic values among the Muslims. It is interesting to note that after the eruption of street protests against the degrading and ridiculing cartoons of the prophet in January 2006, followed by a boycott of Danish consumer goods in some Arab countries, the Danish press and TV continued showing the infamous cartoons with their reportage of the story.

Ridiculing of the vulnerable Muslim minorities in the Danish visual media and the press, however, predates the internationally known cartoons controversy. Already about 9 years ago, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, the licence-financed public-service TV, Radio and Internet media of Denmark, launched an interactive game for the youth on its website calling it *Perker Play*.

Several descent circles of society and the migrant organisations reacted promptly for its racist overtones and the name of the game itself. *Perker* is an expression of hate-speech in Denmark which is used mostly against the Muslims and it can be juxtaposed to expressions such as "Nigger" in the USA or "Wog" or "Paki" in Britain. Moreover, the theme of the play itself was highly racialised stereotype of the Arab youth, who drives in a BMW automobile and chases blond women. Defending the launch of this game based on racist humour, the then Director general of Danish Broadcasting Corporation, Christian Nissen, argued

that the immigrants ought to be open-minded and tolerant for humour and satire, for as he saw it, it helps to bring the Danes and the migrant community together. A similar argument was provided by the cultural editor of the paper, *Jyllands-posten*, Fleming Rose, in the accompanying article with the publications of the cartoons, in which he advised the Muslims to be ready for the taunt and ridicule. (*Jyllands-posten* 30.09.2005)

Thus the racist humour and defaming of the holiest icons of a marginalised faith community in the mainstream media was regarded as a step forward to social integration of the Muslim minorities.

Whether racist humour, satire and blasphemy in a multi-ethnic setting of asymmetrical social structures and power relations leads to more integration remains a big puzzle for the social scientists. However, this is the way the media managers often defend their unethical practice as a second argument, the first being the fetish of free-expression, which the backwards Muslims are unable to understand while living in a free society.

At the outset, it may appear as two individual media events quite incidental of which one became internationally known because of some violent protests across the Muslim countries and communities.

In this essay, I will argue, however, that hate-mongering against Muslims in Danish mass media has become a routine practice since the late 1980s and the trend has been cumulative ever since.

The publication of the cartoons, as some domestic observers have noted, was the last straw on the camels back in these anti-Muslim media campaigns (Hervik & Berg, 2007). On this account, Denmark has attracted a good deal of inter-national criticism from various European human-rights organisations such as EUMC<sup>1</sup> (2002); (ECRI<sup>2</sup>, 2000; 2006); (ENAR<sup>3</sup>, 2004); (OSCE<sup>4</sup>, 2006) which the successive governments have either denied the authenticity of such reports or have simply ignored them arrogantly. For instance,

1 European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.

2 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance.

3 European Network Against Racism.

4 The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

commenting on the latest country report by the Council of Europe (ECRI, 2006) the Liberal Prime Minister, Anders Rasmussen, called it a sub-standard work worth throwing in a dustbin.

The same fate is met by critical scholarly research of the academic institutions. Such publications are either totally ignored by the press and TV, or if reported, they are effectively ridiculed by the press reviews. This has become a set pattern for many years parallel to the increasing number of critical assessments of institutionalised media practice on ethnic affairs in Denmark.

### **Free-speech, the values-clash and the 'crash' of values**

By taking point of departure from the infamous cartoons controversy, it is interesting to note, that none of the major newspapers, nor any audiovisual mainstream media during the intensive debates over the issue ever questioned the very legitimacy or the moral righteousness of hurting the sentiment of over a billion Muslims of the world. Some intellectuals from the Danish elite, however, did raise the question and became themselves a target of ridicule in the media.

In a rigorous analysis of the 232 articles from seven major dailies of Denmark, from the period when the diplomatic crisis and the Muslim protest were at their height in February and March, 2006, Hervik & Berg (2007) have noted that none of the media denied the constitutional right of free-speech of *Jyllands-posten* to print the defaming cartoons. Only one liberal daily, *Politiken*, and the conservative *Berlingske Tidende*, took a rather different strand on the issue, though not concerning the harm or injuries to the Muslims as such but an open criticism of the government for its non-professional way of handling the crisis.

Almost all the mainstream media outlets aligned with the Prime Minister's views on the issue from the day one which emphasised on "free-speech and the Press' right to provoke political and religious authorities". (Interview in *Jyllands-posten*, 30.10.2005, cf. Hervik & Berg, 2007 )

First of all, one may ask, was it a religious or political authority the newspapers was provoking to, or the ordinary believers of the second largest faith of the world? What does it mean to portray a religious icon as a terrorist whose name is part of the rituals of passage of life for all the believers from the birth of a child to the funerals of the mortals. When the Tsunami struck the Southeast Asia, the same Prime Minister who prides on the secular values of his country, and who has publicly denounced the creeping of too much religion in the public debates, was seen on television praying in church for the Danish tourists who lost their life in the tragedy alongside the rest of elite of the country. The majority of the victims, as we know, were the Muslims of Indonesia. In their collective funerals, the name which provided solace to the families was not Jesus but Muhammad.

If the sanctity of Jesus is holy and sacred to the secularised Christians of Denmark, not necessarily because of the Christian dogmas, but the psychological function it performs for upholding a collective solidarity in the time of crisis and tragedies, why then the things should been seen in a different perspective when it comes to the psychological needs of Muslims?

The classification between the sacred and profane of the world's objects is a universal human phenomena that has existed even in the primitive religions long before the advent of monotheistic or the Abrahamic religions of the world. (Durkeim, 1915). This distinction is equally important to Hindus and Buddhists as it is to Christians, Jews or the Muslims, regardless of their degree of affiliation with the religious dogmas and myths.

When the Talibans in Afghanistan destroyed two old statues of Buddha in the mountains about 270 kilometres northeast of Kabul, all the Muslim nations condemned this act of sheer ignorance and intolerance of another faith. The press in the neighbouring Muslim country, Pakistan, wrote editorials and columns up and columns down condemning the act. On the other hand, not only the Danish government but as the analysis by Hervik & Berg mentioned above has shown, the media in general supported the symbolic vanda-

lism of the sacred object for the Muslims by *Jyllands-posten* by referring to free-speech, and by blaming the protesting Muslims as backward, irrational, fanatics and threat to our democratic values.

Values such as free-speech as Hussain, Z. (2007) has so succinctly expressed are by their nature never absolute but very often are balanced against some the other conflicting values either for maintaining the cohesion or solidarity in the society or for avoiding disturbance and disorder.

*"As is so often the case, pushing any value, however virtuous, to an extreme begins to yield perverse results. So it is with free speech. Demands of free speech and those of other desirable values have interacted and made accommodations with each other. One of those other values, for example, is human survival, and for that reason shouting "fire" in a crowded theater is not permitted as justifiable exercise of free speech, since we do not wish to be trampled to death. We know of too many other instances in which we would want to give priority, or at least some or equal weight, to other values as much as we do to free speech".*

The unwritten but implicit values of a civilised society aside, even the formal Danish constitution stipulates freedom of speech with personal responsibility and which is often upheld also by the mass media through voluntary constraints when it comes the sacred objects of any other faith or religion. It is perhaps a mere coincidence that prior to the publication of cartoons defaming the prophet, the same newspaper had received some defaming material on Jesus, which the paper refused to publish on the grounds that it may be a source of harm for our Christian readership.

Then we have also another case of blasphemy which never evoked any discussion of clash of values, our secular values, or the free expression. A huge retail store in Denmark, Foetex, attempted to sell summer sandals with the Jesus' portrait on the inner sole of the foot-wears. Some priests and many concerned citizens complained about it through the same press that is bent on hurting the Muslims by providing one or another good excuse for it. It did not take much time before the store took off the sandals from their shelves all over in the country.

During the 1980s an eccentric artist, Jens Thorsen, painted a naked portrait of Jesus which was hanged in the halls

of Copenhagen's main railway station. The painting depicted a huge male organ of the holy icon and thus caught the attention of the public as well as the minister of the railways, Arne Melchior. He immediately ordered to take this painting down from the railway station.

These examples illustrate that freedom of expression is by no means absolute. When it comes to the reality and out of the realm of rhetoric, there are many examples to testify that the government intervenes, the newspaper apply self-censor, and the consumer chain stores refrain from hurting the public sentiment by paying attention to the sacred in an otherwise overwhelmingly secularised society. In other words, there are mechanisms which check for time and again that a crash of basic civic values does not occur to the harm of a religious minority or to the overall cohesion of the society. The problem, seen from a sociological level of analysis, is that all those institutional mechanisms fail to catch up with the civilised values when the target of harm are the Muslim only.

And it has a causal link to the institutionalised practice of the mass media which exerts a significant influence in shaping the public and political consensus on issues concerning the ethnic minorities of this country. (see, for example, Hansen, 1992; Shierup, 1993; Togeby and Gaasholdt, 1995; Hussain et al., 1997; Hussain, 2000, Hervik, 1999; Hervik, 2002; Andreassen, 2005; Yilmaz, 2006 among others).

This situation is not unique to the Danish context only. Other international research from societies in which face-to-face social interaction between minorities and the majority population is limited has shown the similar results (see, for instance, van Dijk 1987; 1991; Hartmann & Husband, 1974).

A stark difference comparing to other European societies is that on the issue of Islam or the Muslim migrants, there is no significant ideological nuances or the Right-Left divide any-more between the various media outlets, a tendency that has emerged in the Danish media landscape after the fall of the Berlin wall. The frame analysis of the cartoons controversy in the seven major news dailies (Hervik & Berg, 2007) is itself a case in the point; an almost unanimous strand in all the media supporting *Jyllands-posten*.

For the sake of illustration, I shall present, with reference to the analysis above, a few excerpts from the editorials of three newspapers<sup>5</sup> on the issue to underline that regardless of their otherwise position in the Danish political spectrum, their views on Muslims or Islam are equally simplified.

The first one is from a popular daily with quite a diverse readership, especially among the strata with low level of formal education.

*"It is simply abuse of language to expect that Danish Christians, Jews or pagans have to show respect towards a religion which practice goes against that of human rights. In Islamic model societies such as the Saudi Arabian, women are held in herds as veiled slaves. People are decapitated on the main square. Whipping is an ordinary penalty. Stoning of infidel women an accepted sanction. Other religions are banned. A free press does not exist". (Ekstra Bladet, editorial, 1.3.2006).*

This paper is the largest tabloid in terms of daily circulation and is administered by a chief-editor who has been the Conservative Justice Minister of Denmark in the early 1990s. This simplified version of Islam based on Wahabi ideology is *the* Islam par excellence for all the Muslims, according to its editors. During 1997, the paper in response to the declaration of the year by the EU as Year Against Racism, launched its own focused campaigns against the immigrants. As to make it clear for the public, which immigrants it was campaigning against, the add of the article series was displayed across the billboards of the country also in the Arabic language.

Prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the then left-leaning newspaper, *Information*, a favorite of socialists and other leftist intellectuals used to attack the racist slant of *Ekstra Bladet* in its editorials. Times have changed. Following is an excerpt from *Information* on the cartoons issue and concomitant diplomatic crisis, which saw it as fight against the global threat posed by the islamists. No mention of a perspective that the ordinary Muslims themselves feel threatened and harmed because their faith has been ridiculed by these cartoons, or they have also the right to express their frustrations and objections.

5 Translations: Hervik & Berg, 2007.

*"(...) the point is that the fight against totalitarianism in the current context has to be conducted as a fight against the special forms of repressions of the totalitarian thinking rather than against a diffuse "Islamism". The, fight has to include the repression of women, of speech-faith and freedom of assembly, of other human rights". (Information, 4.3.2006).*

The *Berlingske Tidende* has traditionally been as conservative Right-wing paper.

It did criticize the very idea of publishing these provocative cartoons, however, supported the newspapers freedom of speech at the same time in the same editorial. Apart from this ambiguity, its editor-in-chief reflects also his vision of Islam;

*"Islam is the opposite of Christianity. Islam is almighty and infallible, a religion of law, a system, where faith and the law are connected, where the answers to all existential questions are to be found in the holy book. They are not to be discussed and they are definitely not to be mocked. We must understand that some Muslims also in this country have a fundamentally different way of thinking than us and some of them simply will not accept our way of life and our democratic values". (Berlingske Tidende, editorial, 5.2.2006).*

Again, as one may read, it is a vision that simplifies a complex phenomenon, and ignores that Islam has gone through many historical changes depending upon on which Muslim sate, or which historical period you put your focus on. To quote an accredited British political philosopher, Bhikhu Parekh (2006, p. 2001), "Contrary to popular misconception, Islam has undergone more drastic changes than almost any other religion. Turkey under Ata Turk underwent extensive secularization including even changes in dress, script etc. Libya under Gadaffi broke the hold of the Ulema (the Islamic literati) ... Nasser proclaimed a socialist interpretation of Islam and nationalized Al-Azhar University in 1961". One may also notice that there is lively debate and cultural criticism going on in almost all the Muslim countries and among the Muslim Diaspora in the West about various issue of human and women rights along with the new interpretations of the holy scriptures.

But let us come back to Denmark and examine what are these "our democratic values" which allegedly some of the Muslims in this country do not accept.

Only a month ago in March the Ministry of Integration (2007) released a survey based report based on 4.500 interviews among the Danes and various national groups of immigrants – mainly Muslims.

Translated into English, 'Values of the Danes and Immigrants' this report over 500 pages, prepared under supervision of a respected professor of Sociology at Copenhagen University, Peter Gundelach, reveals that the ethnic Danes tend to be far less democratic when it comes to fundamental democratic values such as freedom of speech, right of assembly and association, right to exercise one's faith etc. Only 40% Danes consented to the latter, compared to 76% of immigrants and 86% of their descendents.

On the question of everyone's democratic right to hold meetings and to put forward one's political claims, only 39% Danes agreed to it against about 59% of the immigrants.

One may also put this hypothetical question by the principal of abduction (that is, putting the same issue in an other context, time and space): is it a value in it self to vandalize deities or holy icons of people belonging to another faith and reduce it to a mere question of testing the state of free-speech in the society as many editors of the Danish press have been emphasizing?

What if in India, the USA or in Malaysia the newspapers and the government use the same argument and let the press get loose on each other's faith and religion to test the status of free speech or the muscles of political islamists? Will it strengthen the democratic values and social integration of these democracies? Freedom of speech is indeed an inalienable value of an open and democratic society, not the freedom of abuse and emotional harm, whatever the purpose might be.

During the turn of the millennium, the former Social Democrat Prime Minister, Poul Rasmussen, addressing the nation on TV complained that some residential areas in Danish cities have been turned into immigrant ghettos, such that the Danes feel strangers in their own neighborhood. And thereafter he advised, "Everyone should learn the Danish values". (*DR-TV*, 01.01.2000)

This rhetoric on “our values” versus “their values” has only replaced the previous emphasis on “our culture” versus “their culture”, especially after the 9/11, in almost all the Western societies with explicit reference to Islam and the Muslims. This is one of the core themes around which the Danish media and the highly vocal politicians have debated the cartoon crisis, blaming the Muslims for not accepting our values to criticize any religious dogmas and authorities. Criticizing the religious dogmas, however, is one thing, which the Muslims have been engaged with throughout the centuries, but it is beyond comprehension why vandalizing a holy icon of any faith community that provide solace to millions of souls in times of despair and grief can be considered as part of “our values”. The Reformation of the Christian Church after all did not take place by defaming the Christ, but by rational argument against the prevailing dogmas and their absolutism.

And what are the Danish, British or Egyptian values other than the social constructions contingent upon the political and economic needs of an historical era and circumstances. One of the lessons of post-Enlightenment rationalism which the present Western rhetoric of values has gone oblivion to was rejection of the idea that vice or virtue is something essential to a particular ethnicity. In the context of the British debate on values and culture, writes Terry Eagleton (*The Guardian*, 21.02.07);

*“There is an insuperable problem about introducing immigrants to British values. There are no British values. Nor are there any Serbian or Peruvian values. No nation has a monopoly on fairness and decency, justice and humanity. Some cultures cherish one kind of value more than others do (Arabs and hospitality, for example, or the British and emotional self-discipline), but there is nothing inherently Arab about hospitality, or inherently British about not throwing a hysterical fit. Tolerance and compassion, like sadism and supremacism, can be found anywhere on the planet.”*

Freedom of speech is as dear to Muslims as it is to any other faith community, despite the fact that majority of the Muslims live under undemocratic post-colonial political systems.

## The Pretext of printing the cartoons

The very argument for defaming the prophet, or excuse is perhaps a better word, which was given before and after the event has been that a writer, Kåre Bluitgen, had written a children book on Islam but could not find any cartoonists to illustrate the text through drawings of the prophet, because they feared the extremist Muslims.

For the first, this is not the whole truth as the media wanted to have us. Larsen and Seidenfaden (2006) have documented through their research that he consulted only 3 persons, but they declined to undertake the job. Which it self should not be something surprising. Bluitgen through his earlier anti-Muslim and anti-Islam writings has earned a certain reputation in the press and publication circles. The manuscript for the children’s book is no exception. It is any artist’s own free choice and judgment whether one wants to be associated with a hate-mongering manuscript. If the three cartoonist declined to go ahead with his subversive enterprise, one can not deduce from it that no cartoonist in the country dared to use his free speech under the threat of extremist. The 12 cartoons in *Jyllands-posten* testify that it was possible, had he searched further in the market.

A week earlier to the date of publication of the caricature, the literary section of a Danish elite weekly, *Weekendavisen*, which in many views has become a mouth-piece of the Neo-Conservatives of Danish format, carried a precursory column written by Klaus Rothstein, a former information officer of the Danish Refugees Council, but now a writer and columnist with the weekly. It was perhaps the first article in the press as whole through which I got information about the existing of a new manuscript by Kåre Bluitgen. What surprised me, however, was not his book on Islam, but Rothstein’s column defending his freedom of speech to publish his book with illustration of the prophet, which Muslims consider blasphemy, highlighting a threat to the potential artists which was only a supposition at that stage. The column itself was not a provocation to any Muslim, but on the other hand it was not even a token support to their sensitivity or concerns either. The message was rather a wakeup call for publication community and artists that our freedom of free speech is being threatened. What surprised me was the fact

that Rothstein knew very well what kind of stuff Bluitgen had written previously about the Muslims, and yet this aspect of the story was not touched at all in his column.

Following is a quote from his earlier book from 2002;

*“Leftwing should start an offensive by parading through Norrebrogade<sup>6</sup> in Copenhagen, wearing Burkhas, Chadors and long coats, pushing a sea of folding prams and baby carriages and in the end, throw all this in a container at Blaagaard square as well as splash the Koran with menstruation’s blood.” (From his book: For the benefit of the blacks, 2002, p.70).<sup>7</sup>*

So here I found a Rothstein who until yesterday was advocate of human-rights had turned into a devil’s advocate endorsing freedom of unlimited hate-speech as long as it hurts only the Muslims.

A week later, on September the 30<sup>th</sup>, the 12 cartoons appeared in the *Jyllands-posten*.

## Why only the Muslims?

As mentioned earlier the cartoon controversy, apart from the violent protests, triggered a heated debate on free speech vis-à-vis Islam across the European countries and in the Americas, including the USA. In a forthcoming anthology, Hussain, Z. (2007) analyses these debates through a frame analysis in which he quotes the cultural editor of *Jyllands-posten* for having written several months after the publication of cartoons that it had a point to integrate and include the Muslims into the Danish tradition of satire because the Muslims are part of the society, not strangers.

For the first this explanation does not fit well into his previous *raison d’être* which he offered in his accompanying article with the cartoons on 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2005, namely the threat to the artists’ freedom of speech, and in which he challenged to the Muslim populace that they better get ready for taunt and ridicule. And secondly his newspapers has been from the late 1980s a megaphone for extreme Right and anti-immigrant discourse and rhetoric and still is.

Thirdly, the same newspapers in the proximity of the same period, when the cartoon crisis went on is on the record to have refused to publish material that was harmful for both the Christian and the Jews.

And fourthly, about the editor’s claim that the ‘satire’ will enhance the Muslim integration, an argument that surfaced also the USA, writes Hussain, Z (2007);

*“But, “Muslims are being insulted and ridiculed, Islam is being ruthlessly analyzed. Since 9/11, Muslims are the only group about which derogatory comments can be made on a regular basis from a variety of arenas – churches, comedy shows, op-ed pieces, editorials, journal articles, books, movies, and Congress and state houses”.*

The ridiculing of the Muslims and their faith in Danish media of mass communication has been going on throughout the 1990s. Thus, Flemming Rose has not introduced something new, albeit he crossed the limits of journalistic ethic. Already in 1988, a pioneering researcher on mass media and ethnic minorities, Charles Husband, had noted in a conference paper, “ Also in Denmark the media have taken a racist perspective on the arrival of the new immigrants”

Perhaps no other broadsheet in Denmark has contributed to the ‘racist perspective’, having Muslims in the focus, than Rose’s newspaper, according to a number of scientific analyses in Denmark. The publication of the cartoons as a strategy of Muslim integration seems far from any sense of rationality, but only a culmination of the ongoing subtle campaign of Muslim-bashing.

Has taunting, hurting religious sensitivities, ridiculing and mocking ever been applied in the history of post-War-II states anywhere in the world to integrate any excluded minorities? Never, because such a strategy creates more schisms and fractions, especially in a socioeconomic context characterized by extreme asymmetrical ethnic relations and unequal access to channels of communication.

It is a great myth, contributed partly by the Danish media itself, that Muslims residing in Denmark are more religious than any other faith community e.g. Buddhist, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews.

6 A sub-district in Copenhagen with a large share of Muslim immigrants.

7 Source and translation, (Larsen, 2006).

Critique of religious dogmas are as widespread among the Muslims as in any other community, yet the media and opinion-makers and part of other influential elite, who have relatively easy access to the channels of mass persuasion target only the Muslims, a fairly diverse group of people, for being irrational which in Denmark as elsewhere in the West are portrayed as a monolithic entity (see, for instance, Said 1989).

At the doctrinal level of analysis neither Christianity, Judaism or Islam can stand the test of post-Enlightenment rationalism of the West, yet the media focus only on Islam and the Muslims as irrational, backward and too religious. The American communication scholar, Carlin Romano (1987) provides quite a plausible explanation for this skewed media focus in the American context, which resembles very much the Danish one;

*“The Press does not critically examine privileged cultural beliefs (...) Although the foundational beliefs of the major traditional religions in the United States - Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic – all fly in the face of modern scientific knowledge, the American press avoids any critical examination of their doctrines (...) They are taboo, in part, because they are the religions of the editors and their readers.”*

### **The Muslim’s access to the Media and dissenting Danish voices**

It has been now for more than a decade become a common practice in the Danish television and the pictorial representations in the press, that whenever a news or debate about the Muslim immigrants gets coverage, either the bearded men or women covered with traditional Arabic head-scarf are brought forth as *the representation* of Muslims in Denmark. The majority of Muslims living in Denmark do not look like the media picture. Women without headgears, if they seldom appear in the pictures then the context often is not Islam, but very often as a representation of integrated “new-Danes”. The media semiotic leaves no doubt for the audience that either you are Muslim or you are a Dane. You cannot be both. The farthest your physical appearance, dress etc. from an average in the population the closest you are to a Muslim identity in the media representations.

This odd logic was displayed also during the media coverage of the cartoon crisis in Denmark during February and March 2006, and it determined for the journalists whom to interview, or quote, in connection with the news, features and debates.

According to the survey of the press by Hervik & Beg (2007), the most prominent voices and faces in the coverage were first and foremost two Muslim prayer-leaders, or imams, from the Islamic Society of Denmark, Imam Abu-Laban and Imam Akari, both with an Arabic background. They were from the day one of the crisis presented as extremists and were held responsible for violent reactions by the protesting mobs in the Middle East, because prior to the outburst of violent protests, they had traveled to some Arab countries to put pressure on the governments there to do something about the anti-Muslim climate in Denmark. They were also accused of spreading false propaganda about the anti-Muslim campaigns in the country.

Another figure that was given a prominent space in the media was the member of the Parliament representing a center liberal party, *RadikalVenstre*, Nasar Khaddar, also from Arabic background. He was mainly quoted for criticizing the allegedly extremist imams, who were advised by him to leave the country “if they don’t like the smell of the bakery”. (Hervik & Berg, 2007).

In addition to it, there were a few other Muslim voices, but by any standard not many in proportion to the volume of ongoing coverage. To the best of my knowledge no Turkish, Pakistani, Bosnian, Somali or Iranian imam was presented in the daily reportage on the crisis, although the number of Muslims from these countries constitutes the much largest share of the Muslim community living in Denmark. To listen to their opinion, it seems, was not deemed necessary to elicit a Muslim point of view, for example, how they feel seeing their prophet being repeatedly portrayed as a terrorist.

Thus the main actors in the coverage from the Muslim community were two opposite fronts from the Arabic background in a continuous verbal battle against each other.

No sociologist, cultural anthropologist, Islam specialist, area studies expert or the like with a Muslim background, male or female, from the academia was on the media scene to put the Muslim outrage in perspective on the background of their research or scientific knowledge about Muslim societies or the Muslim communities residing in Denmark.



Also absent in the coverage was the typical vox-pop, a genre especially used by the TV media on controversial issues, for instance, asking a random Muslim man or woman on the street, what he or she means about the cartoons. But, in the press, of course, there was a stream of letter-to editors by the readers who were either tired or afraid of the Muslim presence in their country. It is difficult to ascertain, how was the radio coverage as no data are available as yet. However, some previous research had shown that the public-service radio broadcast in Denmark is far less biased, less sensational and often balanced - notwithstanding the fact there are anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim private radio outlets and Internet media which are run by various types of anti-Muslim associations.

A range of dissenting voices over the publication of the cartoons from various intellectual and professional quarters could be heard to some degree in the Public-service TV, but mostly as op-eds and opinion-columns in the press, mainly in the liberal daily, *Politiken*. These included former Danish diplomats who resented over the Prime Minister's refusal to have a dialogue with the 12 Muslim ambassadors on their request to resolve the issue of the cartoons. And moreover, some lawyers, priests, medical professionals, writers and artists etc. Generally they did not follow the dominant media discourse on freedom of speech, but appealed for dialogue between the cultures, diplomacy and consideration for the marginalized groups. Following is an excerpt from such voices, which probably is one of the most accurate pictures of the Muslim situation in Denmark, presented by a solicitor of profession.

*"Islam is under attack in Denmark and has been for some time, especially after September 11. Muslims have been prevented from building Mosques, from making burial places, from wearing scarves and holding meetings. Muslims have been pestered in the streets with words and with slaps. Muslim stores and clubs are vandalized. Muslims are kept under surveillance, are being arrested and are being portrayed in the press as uncivilized and "abnormal", if not terrorists. The cartoons were the last straw. Let us kick those who are already lying down. Islamophobia is*

*raging. Muslims in Denmark must react; anything else would be unnatural". (Politiken, Sune Skadegaard Thorsen, 9.2.2006).<sup>8</sup>*

## Concluding remarks

In Denmark, like in many other Western countries, the media discourse and political rhetoric is saturated with anti-Muslim sentiment, subtle fear-mongering by media and ideologically charged propaganda by Danish People's Party continues.

There are sufficient indications in the national and international research that Muslims are victims of hate and marginalization in Denmark. The idea of multiculturalism and acceptance of diversity has become under sever attack in some of the most liberal western societies after the 9/11 (Modood et al, 2006).

In Denmark, however, multiculturalism has never been promoted in the Danish political culture as way ahead to face the challenges of increasing cultural diversity (Mouritsen, 2006).

During the late 1980s and up till the mid 1990s it was their different culture which was difficult to integrate in Danish welfare state, today it is Danish values that has become a buzz word in the media and political discourse. But the overall discourse remains the same.

Just like any other ideology, the racist ideologies have also their inherent contradictions. Take for instance this political rhetoric that comes into play each time a Muslim individual or a group is reported to have committed a crime, that they better learn the Danish values. But, Danish values are unable to explain, why the Danes brought up in a typical Danish family, schooled in typical Danish institutions, day after day, years after years, commit all sorts of crimes and indulge into illegalities and immoralities from corporate tax evasion, sexual abuse of children, domestic violence, mistreatment of the elders and mentally distorted people, embezzlements with the public funds and planting of hoax into the serious sections of the press and TV to stir up hatred against ethnic minorities.

<sup>8</sup> Source and translation, Hervik & Berg (2007).

In 2004, the department of research at the Ministry of Justice released a report, based on court-decisions data that followed the whole cohort of Danish population born in the 1960s. It revealed that among this group of Danes every third citizen has been convicted for one or another type of legal offence. Add to this all those resourceful Danes who were able to evade the grip of law and the courts and you can have an idea about the shallowness of the concept, Danish values.

It has become a routine in the Western press, as in Danish, to associate Islam with terrorism. Few from the average populace of the Western countries would know that this ghost of Bin Laden is a creation of the American foreign policy in the Muslim world rather than the Koran, which the largest majority of Muslims do not understand and cannot read. Neither the seculars, atheists, nor the adherent of faiths such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism or even Buddhism can escape the blame for having used their ideologies or the good name of their faith to have killed thousands and millions of civilians alone in the past century.<sup>9</sup>

Returning back to the overwhelmingly anti-Muslim journalism in the Danish media, one might wonder how could it go on unchecked in an otherwise civilized, democratic, and a liberal society, although the Muslim in other western countries are facing the same problem, albeit not of the same intensity.

My explanation is somehow like this, readers can draw their own conclusions.

Compared to other western nations it is a small country with a language that hardly any one understands out of Scandinavia. This smallness, or the sense of it, cultivates a specific tribal or provincial mentality leading to a national consensus on major political issues. This smallness also means that the elite that runs the media is also a small clique which rotates from one media outlet to another, from the commercial to the public-service and vice versa. It is the ideology of this clique that is reflected in the media practice. The media coverage of Muslims and Islam on issues, which are formulated and set on agenda by the media themselves,

generates fear and anxieties in a subtle manner and it ultimately helps reproduce a negative consensus. The coverage of cartoon crisis is quite illustrative; first an influential weekly of elite urges the journalists and artists to do something as our freedom of speech is being threatened. Then the largest daily of the country publishes provocative cartoons that stirs up the Muslim anger to a point that it becomes an issue of national and diplomatic crisis for Denmark. Consequently it becomes a source of news, debate and analyses in all the national media. The way in which the issue is covered demonstrate that the entire press stands firm behind the *Jyllands-posten's* constitutional right of free speech, and it is the Muslims they are irrational, fanatics, a threat to our democratic values. If an average Muslim is hurt by the whole trouble, initiated by the media, it is an other story, perhaps interesting for a moral philosopher, but not 'our' headache.

6 See on this an excellent article by Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar in *Times of India*, 23.07.2006, "Terrorism is certainly not a Muslim monopoly".

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