

Words on images: the cartoon controversy

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What emerges clearly from the dispute over the publication of controversial cartoons of Mohammed in the European press is that though globalisation may make the world seem more easily navigable and more familiar, it brings with it new social, cultural and political territory that is not so easily negotiated. Hence **openDemocracy's** decision this week to solicit brief comments from a range of writers with differing opinions and perspectives on the situation, to begin mapping this rocky terrain.

Twenty writers [1] from countries around the world contributed to the discussion summarised here, in which various calls for further debate, dialogue and creative thinking were made. These complemented the full articles we ran:

- Neal Ascherson, "A carnival of stupidity [1]"
- Doug Ireland, "The right to caricature God...and his prophets [2]"
- Tariq Modood, "The liberal dilemma: integration or vilification? [2]"

Free speech and censorship

The concept of free speech held up in defence of the cartoons' publication has been seen among some Muslims and non-Muslims as a red herring, and a pretext for racist stereotyping, as Shaida Nabi [3] notes. Sajjad Khan [4], among others, observes that absolute freedom of speech doesn't exist, many western societies have laws censoring speech, and in the context of debate, rules of civility are commonplace.

In highlighting the conflation of two separate debates – namely whether it was *desirable* and *right* to publish the cartoons – Henri Astier [5] points out that, contrary to common assumptions, European governments are actually keen to censor speech, and while erosion of free speech at official level progresses, such rows are to be expected: "With France's state apparatus working to restrict speech to responsible speech, it is no wonder that aggrieved groups seek to enrol its help to silence those who offend them." Meanwhile Sami Zubaida [6] traces a clear history of Islamist censorship and indeed persecution in the field of cultural and academic expression in the middle east. He cites an example – one among many – from theoretically pluralist Egypt and suggests that a clear stand is needed against such intimidation designed to instil self-censorship.

The press and the butterfly effect

KA Dilday [7] observes that "globalised amplification" not only has the ability to protect some from otherwise unseen repression, but also – at its worst – has a potential to network violence. In this context she expresses surprise at editor Carsten Juste's surprise that his Danish paper's cartoons could trigger such a powerful reaction. James Howarth [8] echoes the potential for

chaos in the "butterfly effect" and describes a Jordanian editor's effort – lost in the backlash and rewarded with arrest – to put the incident in perspective by publishing and discussing the cartoons to show readers that overreaction was unwarranted. He also warns that in countries where there is no freedom of the press, populations were likely to fail to appreciate that a Danish newspaper does not necessarily reflect the Danish government or people. Souleymane Bachir Diagne [9] emphasises that the insult has also penetrated to countries "of the margins" such as Senegal, as well as those Muslim countries more commonly scrutinized by the global media.

Sami Zubaida suggests an interesting corollary to this globalised media effect in the extent to which Islamic culture may in fact now be regarded as a world culture, not owned predominantly by particular countries or communities but open for airing and discussion on a much larger stage. On a darker note, Tom Asher [10] sees in the *umma* capacity of Islam a potentially dangerous engine of mass violence.

Politics and protest

But this butterfly effect has not simply been some force of nature, as Zaid Al-Ali [11] points out in relation to the Lebanese protests, which were apparently manipulated to produce sectarian violence and carry an implicit Baathist warning against Islamists to shore up the current regime. In fact most Lebanese saw a clear distinction between legitimate acts of protest and illegitimate violence. Shaida Nabi cautions against a view of the protests that would denigrate Muslim political expression as inherently transgressive. She sees in the cartoons a tradition of racist representation and the spectre of holocaust. Max Farrar [12] also stresses the democratic nature and tradition of protest and recommends that, in the UK, attention should instead turn to the political avenues of Muslim participation, to assess how far the extremist organisation al-Ghuraba can be said to represent the UK's Muslim population, and to address the absence of a progressive political force among young British Muslims, which he finds worrying. Fauzia Ahmad [13] expresses concern about the role of elected representatives and governmental institutions in problematising and pathologising migrant cultures.

Meanwhile KA Dilday shines a spotlight on Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's refusal to meet ambassadors representing predominantly Muslim countries over the issue, saying that regardless of whether he thought their anger over the cartoons was justified he should have recognised that the request for a meeting in itself called for the foreign minister's attention and the reception of the delegation – whether or not such a meeting was expected to change the Danish position. James Howarth believes this decision gives the prime minister's plea for clemency "a very hollow ring".

Division or solidarity?

The European press voiced solidarity over their freedom to publish. In turn, Mohammed Sajid [14] notes that his outrage on learning of the cartoons was tempered by an awareness of his own amusement at humour at the expense of Christian beliefs – he wonders whether Muslim solidarity falls short in this respect, since Muslims do not protest against attacks on other religions. Ramin Jahanbegloo [15] sees a transformation of tolerance into intolerance in particularised politics, and stresses that "the west and the rest" are irrational categories, while Souleymane Bachir Diagne hopes that refocusing in building a just world might help to overcome unhealthy antagonisms.

Saeed Taji Farouky [16] finds appreciation of cultural relativism still lacking – in this case "a distinct failure to understand that the line between politics and journalism is drawn differently" in the middle east and in Europe. For him, Muslim diplomats and protestors have undermined the

concept of legitimate protest by their failure to distinguish between political and cultural responsibilities while the European media has blurred the line between political and ideological clashes in a way that makes it hard to give necessary recognition to the precise nature of Muslim grievances in the matter, which he believes have been misunderstood. Patrice de Beer [17] finds paradoxical common ground in the perception of double standards on both the part of European commentators and "the Arab street" – double standards which are only "the tip of an iceberg of misunderstandings based on the political use of religion".

A word about religion

Roger Scruton [18] calls for respect and draws on the notion of sacrality to foster the understanding that faith is not a set of intellectual beliefs but a way of life.

Sajjad Khan refers to the different symbols of reverence that exist in different societies and affirms a need for sensitivity. Meanwhile Adam Szostkiewicz [19] warns that one should handle religions with care in the "global village", and that a distinction between self-censorship and professionalism can be drawn to support the notion that the media should at least seek advice from the religion-literate when making an editorial or journalistic decision on a religious story. He believes that the cartoon controversy has only benefited extremists.

Converging narratives

So, given the global context of the cartoon debate, contributors offered various narratives to shape understanding. Tarek Osman [20] contrasts the divergent "thinking environments" of the liberal western mindset where the mind rules supreme and nothing is sacred, and of the integral nature of Islam to Muslim ways of life. And he describes the "vapour-cooking pan" of frustration, humiliation and alienation experienced by millions of Muslims and Arabs. David Tyrer [21] highlights racism as an ideological terrain that has been centuries in the making and that should not be "invisibilised". Tahir Abbas [22] stresses the abuse by European powers in the name of freedom and democracy in the middle east, which contributes to a Muslim mistrust. And Tom Asher describes the experience of humiliation black Americans and poor Muslims have in common, and observes that in American society recognition of history's beneficiaries and history's victims has given rise to a measure of license for victims of discrimination to engage in abusive expression that wouldn't be tolerated among the empowered majority. His perception of a huge raw nerve connected to lack of hope plus pride in Islam leads him to suggest that "remember the crusades" might be a slogan for fostering humility rather than humiliation. He points out that "there is no God whose name hasn't been used to license conquest, torture, mayhem and war".

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