

# The Muhammad caricatures: Freedom of suppression

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Global Research, February 07, 2006

[transnational.org](http://transnational.org) 7 February 2006

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Jyllands-Posten's drawings are caricatures with a tendency. They associate the Prophet with terrorism, criminality and repression of women. None of them could possibly serve dialogue, mutual understanding or much needed public education between Danes and the Muslims anywhere. They are ill-willed.

The intensity of the negative reaction may be surprising. But seen in the context of our contemporary, globalizing world, their publication was both thoughtless and purposeless. It reveals a mind-boggling deficit in general education and good (journalistic) manners.

## The Danish government has lost it

Worse, the Danish government understood neither the affair nor the need for early damage-limitation. Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen turned down appeals for dialogue, following an established pattern also in relation to Denmark's policy on Iraq and immigration issues: by definition we make no mistakes and have nothing to learn from anyone.

If the government had understood the world and our times, it could have emphasized Jyllands-Posten's right to publish the caricatures but used the opportunity to strongly distance itself from such counterproductive, offending activity.

The Prime Minister's and the Foreign Minister's press conference in the afternoon of February 7th amounted to little but yet another bout of self-praise without the slightest hints at regret, apology or reconciliation. The Prime Minister's emphasis that he has the full support of George W. Bush – made in a speech to the Muslim world – reveals that he has understood deplorably little of that world.

## Why this is freedom of suppression, not freedom of expression

One must welcome that Jyllands-Posten's editor-in-chief has apologised for the fact that they have provoked and offended so many; he says they were not meant to (January 30, 2006). He maintains that they were published as part of an "ongoing debate on freedom of expression that we cherish so highly." Fine and good – but how utterly blind culturally!

The freedom of expression argument is phoney. That the free press exists is, at best, a qualified truth. The way Western mainstream media treat some contemporary issues, such as their government's participation in wars, is only one of several examples of self-censorship and propaganda in the service of power rather than truth and freedom of opinion formation. Freedom of the press has always also implied the freedom to neglect and marginalise – for instance the larger truth about how and why billions of people keep on

living in poverty. And it has meant a systematic orientation to government policies rather than civil society.

Second, freedom of expression implies responsibility. It doesn't equal a right to humiliate, offend, demonise, defame or slander. Personal maturity as well as cultured behaviour is also about exercising sound judgment and knowing what to say and not to say when – and why. Journalists can still exercise respect, be polite, show empathy and be decent in their dealings with fellow human beings, can't they?

Third, anyone who has travelled outside her or his own culture knows that freedom of expression, together with other so-called universally accepted norms, must be interpreted in a context. No culture or society wants to have foreigners' interpretations imposed upon them. The generalised Westerner – the teacher of the world, never the learner – would strongly decline to have Muslim or Hindu interpretations of those norms imposed on her or his daily living.

### **Self-glorification and institutionalised racism**

I am a Danish citizen who has lived 33 years in Sweden. For shorter periods I have worked in Somalia, the Balkans, Japan, Burundi and elsewhere. What has happened the last decade or so in Denmark eludes me both as a Dane and as scholar. I am afraid, indeed frightened, when I ponder the consequences of what I would call Western self-glorifying civilizational dominance and institutionalised racism. So pervasive and so "natural" has it become since the end of the old Cold War that neither the Danes nor other Westerners in general seem to see it. With the war on terrorism we are already well into a new Cold War. For no good reason except the human folly that stems from the combination of cultural arrogance, absence of self-criticism and empathy.

Not for a second do I believe that the Muhammad caricatures or the freedom of the press argument is anything but the last straw in a series of cultural blind humiliations of non-Westerners. They build on centuries of humiliation and insensitivity of the "other". We have become culturally blind and project our own dark features upon others.

So lacking in empathy has Danish politics become that the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Stig Moeller, repeatedly uses only one word: Unacceptable! – but not about his own government's immigration policies or its participation in genocide and mass murder on the Iraqi people but – yes of course – about the reactions throughout the Muslim world. Increasingly these hours and days, commentators present Denmark as a victim and the Muslim reactions as exaggerated and staged.

Few Danes and few Danish media seem willing to raise the broader contextual questions and ask whether Denmark's policies – Iraq, immigration, Islamophobia – could be the basic cause of all this.

### **They see my country as a rogue state and I don't blame them**

Let's assume that the Danes and their politicians still have manners and human maturity. If so, they would recognise that now is the time for modesty, self-reflection, apologies and reconciliation. A civilisation that has none of it is decaying and, in the process, also dangerous for itself and others. It becomes a rogue civilisation.

These days I fear that Western culture increasingly comes across as lacking both empathy, open debate and the courage to say, We are sorry! My native country is now a rogue state in the eyes of millions of fellow human beings. Whether or not this is a fair judgment of Denmark is not the issue. The issue is that present Danish politics is a prime reason that those millions hold that image.

We could well be witnessing the beginning of a drift towards unparalleled catastrophe.

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