

Why ‘freedom of expression’ defence is questionable in the Muslim dispute with a Danish publication.

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Some drawings published in Denmark’s Jyllands-Posten last September have caused outrage amongst the Muslim community around the world. The drawings depict the Prophet Mohammed, which is considered sacrilegious to the Muslim faith as no images of Mohammed are allowed. If this were not bad enough, one of the pictures depict Mohammed as a terrorist, complete with a bomb in his headdress. These drawings were published again in a Norwegian magazine a few weeks ago, and the ensuing Muslim outrage is costing the Danish/Swedish dairy giant Arla millions of dollars. A boycott of Danish products has seen a \$480 million yearly sale come to almost a complete stop in just five days.¹ The situation is so serious that on January 26th the Saudi ambassador was withdrawn from Copenhagen,² and ten Muslim ambassadors wrote a joint letter to the Danish Prime Minister, asking him to take a stance on the issue, something he has refused to do.³ After initially refusing to apologise, Jyllands-Posten issued a statement to ‘correct misunderstandings’.⁴

Whilst for many people this matter might seem a fuss over very little, I think that it represents very well the situation that we find ourselves in post-9/11, and it is a worrying sign for things to come, for two reasons. Firstly, the argument over these drawings cannot be seen in isolation. For many, these drawings appear as yet another attack among many upon the Muslim people since September 2001. Denmark in particular has been the setting for much hostility in recent years. Secondly, the publication of these drawings represents the confused and conflicting values of Western media, particularly its much-championed yet hypocritical usage of ‘free speech’.

Returning to the issue in Denmark, since 9/11 in particular there has been a series of actions by the Danish government and others that could be accused of victimising Muslims. I will briefly mention a few of these. For three or four years now, the Danish immigration system has become much tighter and discriminative.⁵ In September 2004, a new immigration act was passed specifically in order to limit the ability for Muslims to enter into Denmark.⁶ In the same month, the leader of the Danish People’s Party, Pia Kjaersgaard appeared in the Copenhagen Post, under the headline, ‘Party’s call-to-arms against Islamism’:

Kjaersgaard compared Islamism with Nazism and Marxism, and issued a rousing call-to-arms to party members against this new “world revolutionary” movement, which she said was aiming to impose “Sharia” around the world. Kjaersgaard cited an article appearing in daily tabloid B.T. which put the number of Danish immigrant children sent on “reconditioning” trips at Muslim schools – “Koran prisons,” as Kjaersgaard called them – at 5,000.⁷

This came only a few months after a poll was published in the same newspaper, claiming that one in four Danes believe that there will one day be more Muslims in Denmark than non-Muslims.⁸ Though Muslims currently only make up around two percent of the Danish population.⁹ In April last year, Queen Margrethe of Denmark in an authorised biography argued that Danish people should stand up to Islam, and that Muslims should learn to speak Danish properly.¹⁰ A few months later in October, Danish Member of Parliament Louise Frevert, a member of the nationalist Danish People's Party, was severely criticised for anti-Muslim statements that appeared on her website.¹¹ These included the claim that young Muslims believe that it is their right to rape and assault Danish people. A 2004 political pamphlet by Frevert also claimed that Muslims secretly planned to takeover Denmark. Frevert pleaded ignorance and claimed that her webmaster, Ebbe Talleruphuus was responsible for these remarks. Talleruphuus later accepted responsibility and resigned.

This is just a small sample of a few of the negative Muslim stories that can easily be found through a quick search through any of the major media outlets. And this is the climate in which these sacrilegious drawings of Mohammed appear. Given this climate and the tense post-9/11 and Iraq War global atmosphere, even the most ardent defender of Jyllands-Posten's actions must accept that the publication of these drawings was, at the very least, extremely naïve.

This brings us to the issue of the confused Western media and its consumers. The ideal of free speech is so widely lauded in the West that, when put together with its associates such as democracy, it is even used to justify war. And we should thereby be suspicious of it whenever it used to justify any action or behaviour. We all know that the invasion of Iraq, for instance, had nothing whatsoever to do with democracy and freedom. We all know that the past two elections in the United States were compromised. And we all know that freedom in the mainstream media in the West, whilst forever claiming its freedom, is anything but free. In the first instance profits have to be made and therefore only certain populist media output can ever be dished out to its preconditioned market. The very nature of global media ownership means that only a handful of corporate entities own the vast majority of the globe's total media output, while funding from advertising and sponsors greatly effects this output too.¹² And if the media in the West is as free as it claims it is, then where are the media investigations into the huge contradictions in the official 9/11 account? We have heard plenty about the threat of Islamic fundamentalism these past four years, and endless claims about the threat of terrorism, largely as a result of 9/11. But we have heard little or nothing about what actually happened on that day, aside from endless video footage of the two planes hitting the Twin Towers, coupled with endless photos of Osama Bin Laden.

It would seem that the West's beloved freedom of speech, the ideal that many would like to believe separates them from the rest of the world, is used by the mainstream media as a justification to promote the ruling ideology of the West and little else. They are 'free' to publish whatever they like, so long as it espouses the ascendancy of the West and its corporate agenda. In this context, the anti-racism laws that have sprung up in the West can be seen as little more than a barrier to stop the media from going too far and overtly displaying its real intentions. This check is in place to ensure that as long as the Western media does not overtly insult the non-Westerners of the world, its ideal of freedom can be used as a weapon to promote the agenda of the West and to subvert others, regardless of actual world events. For these can be distorted, ignored or embellished as they see fit, and what they 'choose' to publish is their right; it is their 'freedom' to speak.

The publication of the offensive drawings has been made all the worse by a French

newspaper (Soir) reprinting them on February 1st.¹³ The newspaper claims that in Europe it has the right to print whatever it likes, free from religious threat. Many would agree that this is a noble sentiment, if only the mainstream media of Europe would print what it liked, free from ideological and corporate interests. It clearly does not, and the republication of the drawings that have already caused widespread anger and offence can only be seen as further incitement and a deliberate act of antagonising Muslims. With the current global tensions, grandstanding by the Western media is not a responsible or intelligent thing to do, particularly as its claims of freedom are thin and failing.

The argument over the drawings of Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper must be seen in this light. It is not a black and white case of choosing one side of the argument over the other. It is not about defending freedom of speech or being an offended Muslim. It is about the Western mainstream media and its uses, and people are confused about this. For it is very easy to find people to support your claim of freedom of expression, on a case-by-case basis. Of course, many will say, you have a right to publish whatever drawings you like in your newspaper. But what good is this ideal when it is consistently used to antagonise one segment of society and to promote the ascendancy of another? We seriously need to question the motives and actions of the mainstream media, and find out what lurks behind the mask of 'freedom'. Perhaps events such as these will lead us to this task.

Notes

- 1 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4666298.stm
- 2 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4651714.stm>
- 3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4656664.stm>
- 4 <http://www.jp.dk/meninger/artikel:aid=3527646/>

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