

How 12 Cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed were Brought to Trigger an International Conflict

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Abstract

The publication of twelve Mohammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (JP) led to consumer boycotts, burning embassies and official demands for UN to intervene.

The article analyses why the religious protests in Denmark generated the astonishing international reactions. It concludes that a very hostile rhetoric against Muslims in Denmark and mounting international tensions were important pre-disposing causes for the conflict.

In an analysis of the strategy used by Imams from the Danish Muslim communities the article concludes that they chose a policy of conflict escalation and mobilisation through keeping focus on the religious dimension of the crisis.

The article points to several options, which were not used by the Danish government to de-escalate the conflict and illustrates how the government contributed to conflict escalation by making the case solely a matter of defending freedom of expression.

Finally the article suggests some lessons to be learned, if other cross-cultural crises should appear in European countries in the future.

Key Words: Mohammed cartoons, cross-cultural crisis, Muslim minority, *Jyllands-Posten*, blasphemy, conflict escalation

Introduction

Twelve cartoons – most of them depicting the prophet Mohammed – were published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (JP). Danish protests spread to Pakistan within 2 months. Shortly after this, virtually all Muslim countries experienced demonstrations or riots. An originally Danish discussion about freedom of speech versus respect for minorities fuelled existing internal tensions within and among Muslim countries as well as within a secularised Europe with Christian majorities. Consumer boycotts, burning embassies and official demands for UN to intervene and protect religions against unlimited freedom of speech spread internationally. Denmark found itself in the biggest foreign policy crisis since the German occupation during the Second World War as the crisis rapidly exploded in a conflict of international dimensions.

This article analyses the escalation of the crisis as reflected in the Danish media. Evidently, the conflict, which originated in Denmark and ignited sentiments worldwide,

must be understood in a broader framework than as an offence caused by the cartoons. Thus, this article will utilize a conflict theoretical perspective to analyse the development of the conflict.

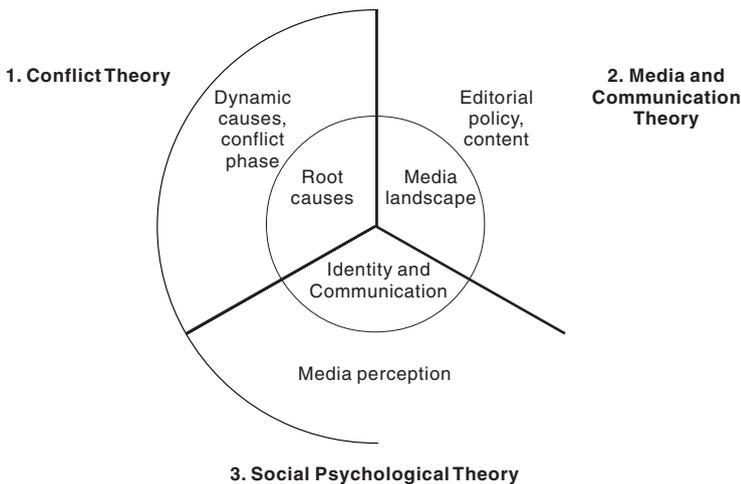
It is the theses, that:

- The religious protests in Denmark generated the astonishing international reactions because *JP* published the Mohammed cartoons at a time characterized by very hostile rhetoric towards the Muslim minority in Denmark as well as mounting international tensions between Muslim dominated countries and the Western countries.
- Danish Imams chose a policy of conflict escalation by focusing on the religious implications of the cartoons and ignoring the widespread protests from the Danes and Danish Muslims against the hostile public rhetoric towards the Muslim minority.
- *JP* and the Danish government chose to ignore the prevailing conflict discourse towards the Muslim minority and by making the case a matter of defending freedom of expression in Denmark ignored the possibility of conflict de-escalation which in fact contributed to conflict escalation.

To analyse the Cartoon crisis the point of departure in this article will be in the Integrated Model for Media Intervention Analysis (Nørby Bonde, 2005, p. 354), which interprets conflicts from a conflict theoretical, a social psychological and a communications theoretical perspective. The model claims that in order to understand the role of media and communication in conflict escalation it is necessary to distinguish between a level of pre-disposing structures and a level of conflict dynamics, into which the concrete communication strategies have an immediate impact. In other words, the first level represents the root causes of conflict, the media landscape, the social identity and social communication as the structures behind the conflict.

The analysis of conflict dynamics include the triggers of conflict, the definition of conflict phase, the editorial policy and content of the media involved, as well as the perception of the media content in the conflict identity groups.

Table 1. *Integrated Model for Media Intervention Analysis*



The analysis of the Mohammed case focuses on the role of media and communication in conflict dynamics, while the pre-disposing structures are included in the analysis only to provide a contextual framework for the communication analysis. The theses are examined through an analysis of the positions and public strategies of *Jyllands-Posten*'s editors, the Danish government and the Danish Muslim communities, primarily as presented in the Danish newspapers *Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken* in the period from September 30 2005 to February 28 2006. *Jyllands-Posten* is chosen because it decided to publish the cartoons and consistently defended this action and *Politiken*, because it most prominently among almost all other Danish newspapers has defended the right to publish the cartoons but criticized the editorial judgement of *Jyllands-Posten* in doing so.

The Trigger of a Conflict

Some Muslims reject the modern, secular society. They demand a special position when they insist on special consideration for their religious feelings. This is incompatible with a secular democracy and freedom of expression in which one must be prepared to accept disdain, mockery and ridicule. (*JP*, 30.09.2005 – Ytringsfrihed: Muhammeds Ansigt)

With this argument, *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons of Mohammed, made by 12 Danish cartoonists. The paper had asked a number of cartoonists – notably not illustrators – to depict Mohammed as they imagined him. Twelve persons submitted a drawing to *Jyllands-Posten*, some of them depicting Mohammed, others a critical comment on *Jyllands-Posten*'s initiative.

Shortly before the publication a Danish comedian confessed that he dared not *take the piss out of the Koran*. A leading arts museum – Tate Gallery, London – removed a piece of art fearing reactions from Muslims. A Danish illustrator who was asked to depict Mohammed in a children's book required anonymity. (*JP*, 30.09.2005 – Ytringsfrihed: Muhammeds Ansigt). Thus the publication of the cartoons followed events, which illustrated that public critique or satire of Muslim religious symbols or the Koran was considered dangerous by some. In one widely publicized case in the Netherlands, such critique had already resulted in the murder of the Dutch film director Theo Van Bon.

Jyllands-Posten (*JP*) was concerned that informal self-censorship should limit the freedom of expression, but the above introduction to the Mohammed cartoons reveals that the paper also had other reasons for publishing the cartoons. "Some Muslims reject the modern, secular society. They demand a special position when they insist on special consideration for their religious feelings." The quote indicates that the paper finds that some Muslims reject modern society. It further indicates that secularity and modernity are connected, and claims that Muslims demand a special position because they insist on special consideration for their religious belief. In other words, *JP* takes it for granted that Christians in contrast to Muslims are modern, secular and do not ask for respect for their religious belief.

"This is incompatible with a secular democracy and freedom of expression in which one must be prepared to accept disdain, mockery and ridicule." *JP* portrays consideration for religious beliefs as incompatible with a secular democracy and freedom of expression. Logically, this criticism should then also be applied to many Christians, and

other religious believers. In this context however, Muslims are the only ones singled out by *JP* and must be prepared to accept disdain, mockery and ridicule in order to prove that they are modern, democratic and accept freedom of expression. Or in other words, *JP* claims that freedom of expression is in jeopardy if the Christian and secular majority of the Danish population does not freely disdain, mock and ridicule Muslims in the country.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” (United Nations 1948). In a journalistic context this is often interpreted as the right to criticise people in power, and the right for all – including small minorities like Muslims in Denmark – to express their opinions and cater for their own interests in the public sphere.

While one could argue that freedom of speech constitutes an unlimited right to criticize and ridicule all religious beliefs, all cultural identities, and all stated symbols of a society, it is necessary in this case also to consider the situation for the minority group in question.

The cartoons followed a public debate in Denmark in which an increasingly hostile rhetoric had put pressure on the Muslim minority. Prominent members of the parliament for the Danish People’s Party, which as the third biggest political party provides the parliamentary basis for the present Liberal-Conservative government, had described Muslim immigrants as a plague for the Danish society. The leader of the Danish People’s Party – Pia Kjaersgaard who has been a Danish MP for 22 years – wrote in the party’s weekly newspaper from June 2005:

Nobody in 1900 would have been able to imagine “that by 2005 human beings at a lower level of civilisation would populate big parts of Copenhagen and other major Danish cities with their foreign primitive, cruel habits – such as honour murders, arranged marriages, Halal slaughtering and blood revenge. This is exactly what has happened. Ten thousands upon ten thousands of people have come to a country, which left the Middle Ages centuries ago, while their own apparent state of civilisation, culturally and spiritually, is in 1005.” (*Politiken*, 20.1.2006 – Tillykke Pia Kjaersgaard)

Almost the same picture was used by the Conservative Minister of Culture, Brian Mikkelsen when speaking at the annual meeting of the Conservative Party in 2005:

There are still many battles to fight. One of the most important ones is the confrontation we experience when immigrants from Muslim countries refuse to accept Danish culture and European norms. In the midst of our country – our own country – parallel societies develop in which minorities practise their medieval norms and un-democratic ways of thinking. This we cannot accept. This is the new front of the cultural battle.

It is fair to say that the Mohammed drawings, which triggered the conflict in Denmark and internationally, followed a period of public rhetoric quite hostile to the identity and culture for significant parts of the Muslim minority in Denmark. This rhetoric had been used for a number of years by some prominent members of political parties ranging from the Social Democrats to the government parties and particularly Danish Peoples’ Party. It can best be described as *Moral Panic*.

The term *Moral Panic* is described by the British sociologist Stanley Cohen fosters in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), the term *Moral Panic*:

A condition, episode, person or group of person emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media (p.1).

The very usage of the term moral panic, ..., implies that societal reaction is disproportionate to the actual seriousness (risk, damage, threat) of the event. The reaction is always *more* severe (hence exaggerated, irrational, unjustified) than the condition (event, threat, behaviour, risk) warrants (p. XXVIII).

This is indeed a fair description of the public rhetoric against the Muslim minority in Denmark.

Let us look at the root causes for this period of hostile rhetoric against Muslim immigrants and refugees:

Root Causes

Muslims living in Denmark are obviously not a homogeneous group, but originate from many different countries, speak different languages, have different cultures, adhere to different lines of Islam, and as all other Danes have different levels of religious activity. Never the less they are very often perceived and described in the media as one group, mainly due to their visibility among ethnic Danes.

The first Muslim immigrants came to Denmark as guest workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s during a period of economic growth and full employment. With increasing unemployment following the oil crisis in the mid-1970s the guest workers, their relatives as well as refugees coming to Denmark from non-European countries were described in the news media “as uncontrolled floods of large, anonymous groups of immigrants” (Andreassen 2005). The majority of guest workers were from Yugoslavia and Turkey, but from the 1980s the majority of new refugees came from outside Europe and often from countries like Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Palestinian areas.

The Danish gender and minority researcher, Rikke Andreassen, has in her Ph.D. *The Mass Media's Construction of Gender, Race, Sexuality and Nationality* analysed 500-600 randomly selected reports from the period 1970 to 2004 in the two Danish broadcasters – DR and TV2 as well as in national and regional newspapers. The stereotype of the criminal immigrant operating in gangs beyond social and juridical authorities appeared in many news stories from the early 1990s. “Some journalists, as well as some interviewees, characterized their criminal behaviors as an integral part of visible¹ minority culture”. (Andreassen 2005, p. 278).

Appearing in the 1970s the stereotype of minority women as oppressed and battered was prominent from the late 1990s to early 2000s. The stereotype of oppressed minority women was emphasised by televised pictures of veiled women illustrating many stories about refugees and other immigrants.

Another stereotype since the 1970s was the image of immigrant men as hypersexual threats to women. According to Andreassen this image was intensified in the news media during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Andreassen claims that ethnic Danish rapists were presented as individuals, whose acts did not represent Danish men in general. In contrast, when covering rape cases with minority perpetrators the news media applied the characteristics of the individual minority rapist to all minority males (Andreassen 2005).

Evidently, immigrants from Turkey as well as from developing countries outside Europe live under socially more vulnerable conditions in Denmark than ethnic Danes.

Their level of unemployment is relatively higher, their educational level lower, their Danish language skills weaker, and their average income lower. Consequently, it is no surprise that they are relatively over-represented in crime statistics, and among battered women and youth gangs. Because of the visibility of particularly Muslim women the media often present these facts as connected to Muslims and to Islam as a religion.

It is fair to say that the factual social vulnerability, the stereotyping, and the division between “them” and “us” in the news media, has created a very hostile rhetoric against visible foreigners and particularly Muslims. With the strong political influence of the Danish People’s Party the hostile rhetoric has increasingly gained more ground in the news media compared to the 70s and 80s according to Rikke Andreassen. Parallel with fostering an image of the Danish nation as consisting of progressive gender-sensitive males and free females, the rhetoric has put reactionary Muslim parallel communities in the limelight, as was the case before the cartoon crisis. This perception of Danes and Muslims constituted the societal context, in which *Jyllands-Posten* decided to publish the cartoons to disdain, mock and ridicule Muslims. It also constituted the root causes for Muslims in Denmark and Muslim Ambassadors to Denmark to protest against the publication of the cartoons.

Internationally, however, the root causes for the violent protests against the cartoons were quite different and should be seen in a much larger perspective than the Danish one.

Despite the multiple differences between Muslim countries and populations, many of them appear to be in a state of social crisis. The Arab countries experience a backlash in education of the population, overwhelming unemployment among young people who constitute a significant part of the population, and in most countries religious movements are strengthened by elections or with parallel social and political systems. The Arab countries are split between relatively secular authoritarian governments, fundamentalist religious opposition movements, radical Islamists, and democratic non-religious movements.

For a considerable period of time the social, economic and political unbalance between the Muslim countries and the West has worried the Arab countries with their long history of strength in culture, education, science, and geopolitical influence. However, the U.S.A. and to some degree also Europe are accused to have employed double standards in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and in relation to the presumed Israeli nuclear bombs, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

The frustration towards the West and the pressure against the local governments to restore control and pride for the Arab populations prepared a very fertile ground indeed for the upcoming cartoons crisis.

Media Landscape

When analysing the media landscapes among the countries dominated by Muslim populations significant differences become clear. In some Asian-Pacific countries there is a pluralist media structure with both public and private media and with a relatively high editorial independence. In the Arab countries state media are dominant and only recently have a few countries allowed private broadcasters to start. Most state media reflect the populations’ frustration towards the West and its double standards, but government control prevents the Arab media from becoming platforms for violent threats against the West or against the local governments.

Regional commercial broadcasters like Al Jazeera and Al Arabia are highly professional and attract an increasing number of viewers compared to the national state broadcasters. As part of their professionalism, the regional broadcasters question critically not only the local governments but also the representatives of Western countries, as well as their motives and possible double standards. In addition, the regional broadcasters tend to broadcast actual events almost unlimited – Iraqi victims killed by Americans, Iraqi suicide bombers, terrorists killing Western victims and radical Islamists threatening to undertake terror actions in Europe and against Western interests.

Apart from the traditional media – radio and TV – new media like the Internet, mobile phones, SMS and MSN have served to reduce the distance between events in a remote part of the world and audiences far away. In other words, an event in Denmark can very quickly be spread to governments and populations in the Arab states as well as to the rest of the World.

If we consider the Danish media landscape very little is done to ease the integration of immigrants into the Danish society. The broadcast media do not provide multicultural programming; Denmark's Radio has closed down all its news programmes in foreign languages, and only a few community media targeting a local audience provide programming aimed for minorities.

Immigrants in Denmark interested in news from their homeland and international relations have to rely on information from international media.

Few analyses of the immigrants' use of media have been carried out, but they indicate that the ethnic minorities tend to use several forms of media – the media of their homeland, ethnic minority media, Danish mainstream media and international media (Catinét 2005, p.47). TV and Internet are very important news media for ethnic minorities, but they tend to find too little international news and news about their homelands in Danish TV.

Editorial Line

The weekly newsletter A4 published (A4, No. 32, 3.10.2005) a survey on immigrants' representation in Danish media, carried out by Mustafa Hussain, sociologist and assistant professor at Roskilde University. From one week's analysis of 8.612 articles and 273 TV and radio reports only 50 reports/articles used immigrants from non-Westerly countries as their sources. Of the 67 immigrants interviewed 57 were asked about subjects relating to recruitment of terrorists or related to problems about their culture, religion, way of life and family patterns. In almost 9000 journalistic reports only 10 immigrants or immigrant relatives from non-Westerly countries were asked about topics related to everyday life and other mainstream issues.

In other words only 0.5% of the articles and radio/TV reports had immigrant sources, and only 0.1% had immigrant sources expressing themselves about Danish mainstream issues. The immigrants from non-Westerly countries make up more than 6% of the total Danish population and are consequently strongly underrepresented in Danish media.

Social Communication and Identity

For many years the ethnic Danes have perceived themselves as a monoculture which has made it difficult to accept and implement a multicultural approach. During the past 30-40 years the image of the Danish identity has been an image of a liberal, gender-ori-

ented, and socially responsible community. As Rikke Andreassen suggests this image might very well have been established by marginalising immigrants and Muslims in the media and in the public.

It is characteristic that active believers among Christians in Denmark tend to defend the rights of Muslims while all politicians be they Christians or non-believers perceive themselves as part of the Danish monoculture, wherein religion is considered a private matter. A minority of Danes express their religion in public, i.e. by the symbol of a fish (the word fish symbolises in Greek the initials of Jesus, Christ, Gods Son, Saviour) on the back of their cars, or wearing a cross in necklaces and elsewhere.

The Evangelic-Lutheran Danish Folks Church organizes the vast majority of active and non-active Christians (83% of the population²) and it is supported by the state (Danish Constitution, § 4). A representative for the Danish Folks Church preaches for members of the Danish parliament every year at its first work day, and the Danish king or queen must be a member of it. Church members pay additional tax, and in spite of the state supported system, the freedom of religion guarantees that you can leave the Folks Church and you can join another religious community Danish Constitution § 67).

The second biggest religion in Denmark is Islam (approximately 4 %³). With their background in different countries, different versions of Islam and different languages, the Muslims in Denmark are organised in a number of communities, and nobody can speak on behalf of all the religious movements. Internally in each religious community the Imam is the spiritual leader and in addition he is used by the active believers as a mediator.

However, it must be noted that many Muslims hardly ever visit the mosque and are as passive believers as most ethnic Danes are. Despite the fact that Danish Muslims are extremely heterogeneous the hostile ethnic Danish rhetoric we discussed above might add to the sense of being left out for all of them.

In this situation the Mohammed drawings can be perceived as yet another attack and can be used to mobilise Muslims across religious communities.

The drawings triggered a conflict between the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish Muslims, but it needed an impetus to develop into an international conflict between Muslim governments, Muslim populations and radical Islamists on one side, and the Danish government, most Danish political parties and the Danish population on the other side.

This point in the conflict may be termed the immediate pre-conflict phase (Nørby Bonde 2005, p. 118) in which the conflict escalates almost unavoidably.

Perception of the Cartoons

On 30 September, when the drawings were published many Muslim kiosk owners refused to sell *Jyllands-Posten* (*JP*, Oct. 1, 2005, p. 16). In the afternoon, the paper received a telephone call in which a young man threatened to kill one of the employees because of the drawings (*JP*, Oct. 5, 2005, p. 18).

On 8 October, Mohammed was the subject for the Friday prayers and in several Danish mosques; the Imams criticized *Jyllands-Posten* and encouraged Muslims to send protests and complaints to the paper (*JP*, Oct. 8, 2005, p. 1). A few days later some representatives for Christian communities and very few politicians had expressed concern about – not the paper's right to publish the cartoons – but its intentions with publishing them (*JP*, Oct. 9, 2005, p. 1-2). These individuals advocated dialogue with the Mus-

lim religious communities instead of confrontation. But the spokespersons on immigration and integration from the Social Democrats at that time and the Danish People's party stated respectively that if Muslims cannot accept criticism of their religion "they should have considered that before they came to Denmark" and "...the protests from the Muslims are horrible". (*JP*, Oct. 10, 2005, page 5).

15 October, 3.500 persons took part in a demonstration against the general treatment of Muslims in the media, and against the drawings in *Jyllands-Posten* in particular. The demonstration demanded that the government should prohibit degradation of religions. (*JP* 15 Oct. 2005, Sect. 8, p. 4). Three days before the demonstration, ambassadors from 11 Muslim countries asked for a meeting with Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen in order to discuss what they perceived as an "on-going smear campaign in Danish public circles and media against Islam and Muslims". The ambassadors mentioned not only the issue of the Muhammad cartoons, but also a Danish community radio, which recently had been indicted for racism as well as the ambassadors mentioned statements by members of the parliament and the Minister of Culture. The letter concluded:

We deplore these statements and publications and urge Your Excellency's government to take all those responsible to task under law of the land in the interest of inter-faith harmony, better integration and Denmark's overall relations with the Muslim world. (Official letter from the 11 Ambassadors, 12 October 2005)

The Prime Minister rejected the ambassadors' request for a meeting with a letter only:

The freedom of expression has a wide scope and the Danish government has no means of influencing the press. However, Danish legislation prohibits acts or expressions of blasphemous or discriminatory nature. The offended party may bring such acts or expressions to court, and it is for the courts to decide in individual cases. (Official letter from P.M. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, 21 October 2005)

This exchange of letters was a serious step in the escalation of the international conflict. In their letter the Muslim ambassadors had complained against the general tone and rhetoric used against Islam and Muslims in Denmark. It was not only an issue of blasphemy but also of a smear campaign against a religious minority. The Danish prime minister perceived the letter from the ambassadors not as an attempt to defend the rights of the Muslim minority but as a sign of complete lack of understanding of press freedom in a true democracy (*JP*, Oct. 30, 2005, p. 6). When he refused to meet the Ambassadors, most diplomats considered this an insult, and this triggered consequences in the following conflict. The Danish prime minister saw himself defending freedom of the press, to be exercised without limits from anything but the law.

In other words, the ambassadors interpreted the drawings in the context of a religious minority, while the Danish government interpreted them as an example of press freedom. Under all circumstances it makes very little sense to see freedom of expression as practiced in Denmark as an absolute without looking at it in an international context.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is an absolute human right, as stated in The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 19). There are, however, a number of international restrictions on the freedom in international conventions.

Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence shall be prohibited by law. (*United Nations' International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights*, Article 20, 1966).

In the *United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, Article 4 (United Nations, 1965)

States Parties condemn all propaganda and all organizations which are based on ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one colour or ethnic origin, or which attempt to justify or promote racial hatred and discrimination in any form. ...

Similarly, in the recent court case at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda *The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (adopted in 1948 and enforced in 1951) has led to verdicts against senior editors and publishers for genocide (Case No. ICTR-99-52-T), because the Kangura magazine and Radio RTLM had promoted fear and hatred among the Hutu majority, mobilized them against the Tutsi minority and according to the Tribunal thereby contributing to the genocide. After the trial, however, which has been brought to appeal, the American Defence lawyer, John Floyd, said in *New York Times*:

What's really on trial here is freedom of the press and intellectual freedom...
...these people should never have been indicted. ... Just with these indictments, the UN is already defending press censorship. (*New York Times*, 2002).

Also the Rwandan government had defended Radio RTML against complaints from human rights organizations, by claiming that it could not stop the radio due to the state's commitment to freedom of speech (Nørby Bonde, p. 288, 2005). Obviously, international conventions may be interpreted in many ways, and the balance between the right to freedom of expression and the right to life or other basic human rights is by nature a political choice.

The same goes for the regulation of blasphemy, which is generally regulated through national laws. There is a huge difference between the practice in most Muslim countries and in Denmark, where the law on blasphemy has not lead to a verdict since 1938 and the limits for criticising Christianity and Christian symbols have been very wide.

In other words, if the Mohammed cartoons are merely interpreted as a case of blasphemy against religious symbols, the Prime Minister had a point when he refused to interfere in the press freedom and comment on the cartoons. This was, however, never tested in court, because the Director of Public Prosecution under the Minister of Justice ruled that none of the complaints over the cartoons raised by Muslims and ethnic Danes would lead to verdicts against *Jyllands-Posten*. The minister of justice could have overruled the Public Prosecutor and brought the case to court, but chose not to.

The Danish government did not comment on the cartoons, and referred all complaints from the Muslim ambassadors, the Danish Muslims, and ethnic Danes to the Danish courts. What is striking is that the government ignored the well-developed tradition for journalistic ethics, as well as the fact that there are different opinions about blasphemy in Muslim countries and in Denmark. The government seemingly treated the cartoons case as Danish domestic policy and a large majority of the population supported the government's claim to defend freedom of expression.

Media Ethics

What kept most of the other newspapers and broadcasters from supporting *Jyllands-Posten's* decision to publish the cartoons was their perception that *Jyllands-Posten* brought the cartoons in order to provoke the Danish Muslim minority. All media supported the right to publish the Mohammed drawings, *Ekstra Bladet* (a tabloid paper) was even jealous that it had not made the stunt itself, but the majority found the right to *disdain, mockery and ridicule* Muslims in Denmark a case which from a press ethical perspective did not deserve their support.

At the infancy of the press, press freedom was closely linked to private ownership and the freedom from the state so that it was possible to discuss and potentially criticize the rulers' decisions as in Habermas' description of the bourgeois public sphere (1991). In 1947, the American Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press attempted to meet the challenges of media concentration as well as sensationalism by defining a social responsibility for the press (Hutchins et al, 1947). The commission suggested that the media should be given full editorial freedom and access to information, while also alleviating a pluralistic debate and providing information for the populace necessary to actively participate in democracy. The media should be responsible for the securing of coherence and inclusion of all groups in the society. These ideals are most clearly expressed in public service broadcasting. A number of codes of conduct for media professionals similarly stress values like factual, true and impartial journalism.

In areas of potential conflicts – like Nigeria, Afghanistan or the post-war republics of Yugoslavia – the codes of conduct for media and journalists as developed by UN, the governments or the media editors themselves are very restrictive to expressions which might offend population groups. In Nigeria for example, all electronic media balance carefully between transmission of services from Christian and Muslim communities in order to avoid new violent conflicts (Nørby Bonde, 2005a, p. 12). In Bosnia-i-Herzegovina and Kosovo, the international authorities have been extremely cautious to avoid biased reporting against any population group as this might cause renewed hate and violence (Nørby Bonde, 2005).

This short account indicates that no objective and absolute media freedom exists. The degree of freedom, which the media practise, depends very much on the societal context. In well-established democracies as Denmark, the social responsibility in editorial decisions depends on self-regulation to a large extent. In other countries, social responsibility is the matter of regulation by national political authorities or international authorities like the UN and OSCE.

The Reaction from the Danish Muslim Communities

On behalf of eleven Muslim organisations in Denmark, social worker Asmaa Abdol-Hamid reported the cartoons to the police, as they found them a violation of the paragraphs on blasphemy and on racism in the Danish Constitution. She stressed to *Jyllands-Posten* that if the paper had used drawings of Mohammed to illustrate an article about Mohammed's life instead, Muslims would not have protested in spite of the widespread prohibition to depict the prophet.

We are particularly concerned about the article about the publication of the drawings. As we read it, it explicitly states that the intention of the newspaper has been to disdain and mock. (*JP*, 29 October 2005, p.6)

In December and January, a delegation from the Muslim communities in Denmark travelled to Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey with copies of the cartoons as well as a description of the conditions for Muslims in Denmark with particular emphasis on the religious aspects and religious racism aimed at Muslims. In the letter accompanying the cartoons, the delegation appeals to everybody “who wants to support our fight to defend and support the holy prophet and with all legal means fight for the passing of a general law, which ensures respect for all things sacred, particularly the Muslim, in a time, which allows attacks on Muslim sanctuaries using “war against terror” as an excuse.” (Pol. 26 February 2006, 4. sect. p. 5).

Previously, the Muslim communities had issued a press release condemning *JP*'s publication of the cartoons, which they criticised for having transgressed the limits for freedom of speech by its mockery of sacred and religious symbols. Therefore, they asked the paper to regret its action and stop mocking sacred and religious symbols. (Pol. 26 February 2006, 4. sect. p. 5).

In a later press release reacting to the *JP*'s refusal to regret and reprint of the cartoons, the Muslim communities stated: “We are left no other option than to ask the governments in the Muslim countries, particularly the country with the two holiest mosques, to live up to their responsibility towards our prophet, “God’s peace and blessing be with him”, and play a historic role in this critical period, when Islam and its sanctuaries are mocked, and when a wrong picture of Islam is created, using the excuse of establishing democracy and conducting war against terror.” (Pol. 26 February 2006, 4. sect. p. 5).

It was evident that the Muslim Communities did not touch upon social injustices to the Danish Muslims in their press releases or in their cover letter on top of the file with copies of drawings, which was distributed during the journey by a mission group to Muslim countries. However, the widespread support from large groups of the ethnic Danish population against the hostile rhetoric was ignored. They also did not interpret the alleged tendencies of racism in Denmark as racism against all minorities, but rather as directed solely against the religion of Islam and its adherents.

Consequently, they sought to mobilise international support for the defence of Islam, the Prophet, and Muslims in their letter to Muslim ambassadors in Denmark and when they met religious and political representatives during their journey.

It is logical that the Muslim religious figures would stress the religious perspective of the conflict. As described above, the stereotypes and the political rhetoric in Denmark are not directed against specific countries of origin, races, or certain cultures of identity, because religion and behaviour are perceived as identical.

Nevertheless, the focus on religious symbols and values proved efficient to mobilise large groups of population in many very different conflicts around the world. Therefore, it is no surprise that with the obvious predisposing causes of conflict between the Muslim and Western world, it proved extremely easy to mobilise international support from surprisingly broad and different parts of the Muslim communities around the world.

The cartoon case was a window of opportunity for the Muslim governments to defend religion upfront without allowing room to the growing religious opposition within their communities. It was also a window of opportunity for the Imams and other religious figures to strengthen their personal position in a diverse society of Muslims in Denmark, and maybe attract persons, who had not been active religiously before.

At this point it is not quite clear yet, what actually did mobilise large parts of the Muslim World against the publication of the cartoons and against Denmark as such. Probably the governments had a strong impact in the Muslim countries, but probably the

uncontrolled agendas by new media and a number of different more or less radical groups may have been more prominent. It only takes one mobile call from Denmark to Pakistan to initiate a demonstration against *Jyllands-Posten* in a small Pakistani town. And it takes one SMS sent to a hundred persons to mobilise people to take part in it.

If the root causes are not removed, there is a high latent risk that new cultural conflicts will appear again due to the efficiency and uncontrollability of the present patterns of communication.

The Government's Reactions

A recent research report carried out for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Erslev m.fl. 2006) by independent researchers notes that:

Maybe the lack of recognising the fact that individuals may have a different view on freedom of expression than *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish government made the drawing-case escalate as drastic as it did. By completely rejecting that there could be other points of view than the unlimited freedom of expression the dialogue was blocked. This may have been the real offence in the drawing case: Not that the prophet was insulted, but that the offence caused by the insult was not recognised.

If this conclusion is right, the government's strategy to maintain that the reaction from Danish Muslims and Muslims internationally was an attack on the freedom of expression indeed did serve to escalate the conflict. For months the Danish Muslims asked for an apology from first *Jyllands-Posten* and as the paper refused to apologise for having published the cartoons, then from the government. Logically, the government could not apologise for an editorial decision made by an independent newspaper, but the government also refused to regret that the paper had decided to do it.

Following popular demonstrations in Pakistan with vague threats against Danes, the Mohammed cartoons were also on the agenda at the Organisation of Islamic Countries on December 7, and the diplomatic reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became increasingly worrying. This led to a change in perspective as reflected in the Prime Minister's traditional New Year speech, which was translated into English and distributed to Muslim countries through the Danish embassies.

During the past year, we have witnessed a heated debate about the freedom of speech, and the limits to freedom of speech. Some find that the tone of the debate has become too shrill and unpleasant. I wish to state this very clearly: I condemn any expression, action or indication that attempt to demonise groups of people on the basis of their religion or ethnic background. It is the sort of thing that does not belong in a society based on respect for the individual human being.

We have a long history of extensive freedom of speech in Denmark. We are to speak freely and present our views to each other in a straightforward manner. However, it must be done in mutual respect and understanding. And in a civilised tone of voice.

And fortunately, the tone of the Danish debate is in general both civilized and fair. (*Anders Fogh Rasmussen, New Year Address 2006*)

In the months following the publication of the drawings, several professional groups of Danes protested against the tone in the immigration and integration debate. They saw

the Mohammed cartoons as the last straw that breaks the camel's back. More than 200 religious ministers used their Christmas services to focus on the consequences of Danish immigration policy, and groups of psychologists, doctors and others protested against the tone of the public debate.

Several communication experts have pointed out that if the tone in the public debate had not been so hostile against the Muslim minority already, the publication of cartoons would hardly have caused the widespread protests in Denmark. If the Prime Minister had expressed his concern about demonising religious and ethnic groups right after the publishing of the cartoons instead of doing it in a New Year's speech 3 months later, this might also have been accepted by all Danish Muslims as a regret of the offence caused by the incident.

One month later, when Danish embassies in Syria and Lebanon were burned down, and Danish flags and photos of the Prime Minister were burned by Muslim protesters all over the world, the Prime Minister went on air at Al Arabia and said far too late to stop the international conflict escalation:

It does not make sense to discuss if a Danish government should apologise on behalf of a Danish newspaper. We cannot do that. If, you ask me about my personal attitude I can say that I personally have such a respect for people's religious beliefs that I would never show Mohammed, Jesus or other religious figures in a way offensive to others. (*JP*, January 31 2006, page 1)

Besides the public reactions many diplomatic experts also claimed that if the government had accepted the requests for a meeting with the Muslim ambassadors, chances are that the international crisis could have been avoided.

In conclusion, there are several lessons to be learned by the Danish government from the cartoon crisis:

Firstly, in the modern globalized world, it is an illusion to have double standards for what is said at home and internationally. Even if a conflict seems to deal with purely domestic issues, information is immediately spread by the Internet, mobile phones, SMS, e-mails, international news broadcasters, and civil society organisations.

Secondly, it is evident that other nations and cultures could have other opinions about and standards for freedom of speech and blasphemy than Denmark. This does not mean that Denmark should adhere to others' standards but is the basis for entering a dialogue on equal terms.

Thirdly, official information about Denmark as a tolerant society will only be appropriated if it reflects the reality as experienced by the recipients – in this case Muslim communities. Information about Danish press freedom might be understood but not necessarily accepted by those who feel that their values have been violated.

Fourthly, when communicating with a world wide public in many different cultural contexts, it is very difficult to manage a communications strategy using fall-back positions. The regrets, the Danish Prime Minister expressed later would have had a larger impact if they had come already when the drawings only were a small Danish crisis.

These are the some of the lessons to be taken into account by not only the Danish but also other European governments when handling communication in future cross-cultural crises.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that the analysis of the events before and after the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* confirms the theses.

The religious protests in Denmark generated the astonishing international reactions because the cartoons were published at a time characterized by a very hostile rhetoric towards the Muslim minority in Denmark and because of the mounting international tensions between Muslim dominated countries and the Western countries.

It is also clear that the Danish Imams focused on the religious implications of the cartoons. They did not dwell on social or political problems for the Muslim minority and they also ignored the widespread protests from the ethnic Danes and Danish Muslims against the hostile public rhetoric towards the Muslims as a minority. By focusing on the religious dimension the Imams chose a policy, which efficiently mobilised Muslims around the world and ultimately added to escalation of the conflict.

Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government chose to ignore the prevailing conflict discourse towards the Muslim minority and by making the case solely a matter of defending freedom of expression in Denmark ignored the possibility of conflict de-escalating dialogue and ultimately contributed to conflict escalation.

As we have seen there were many reasons that twelve cartoons could lead to a crisis with world wide consequences. The freedom of speech is universal but the exercise of the freedom does not take place in a space without a societal context. In the cartoons case the cultural identity conflict between Danish Muslims and large parts of the Danish population and its political leadership derailed most ideas to enhance the freedom of speech and it is not likely that Danish media in the nearest future will go far to challenge Muslim religious taboos. For governments and people in Muslim countries freedom of speech has unfortunately become interconnected with Western cartoons making fun of their prophet Mohammed.

Notes

1. By 'visible minorities' are meant immigrants who do not come from Northern and Western Europe, as well as their children and grandchildren. In this category are included immigrants who do not physically resemble the idealized western, racial image. By 'immigrants' are meant people born outside Denmark who, for one reason or another, end up residing in Denmark for a longer period of time (more than 12 months).
2. There is a constant decrease in membership, and the 83% are from January 2005, according to the statistics from the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs, <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken.html>, 28.8.2006.
3. As personal beliefs are not registered in Denmark, the figure is estimated on the basis of the number of immigrants, refugees and their descendants from Muslim countries as in Statistic Yearbook, Denmark's Statistics 2002, <http://www.dst.dk/pukora/epub/upload/2180/befolk.pdf>.

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