

# Caricatures of the Prophet

## European Integration

The European debate about the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad turned to the integration of Islam and Muslims in Europe, although questions of iconography, freedom of expression and international relations were raised. The traces of this debate can be identified at several levels. Flemming Rose, the Danish editor, justified the printing of the cartoons by appealing to the integration debate: "We are telling the Muslims that we are integrating you in the Danish culture of satire, because you belong to us." But before Rose, a

different approach to integration was evident when children's book-writer, Kåre Bluitgen, searched in vain for an illustrator for his book on Muhammad and the Quran. Apparently, it was his inability to find an illustrator for the figure of Prophet that provided the immediate context for the newspaper to test the tolerance of Muslims. Both Bluitgen and Rose wanted, so they claimed, to make Islam a part of Europe in very different ways.

When the conflict expanded into demonstrations and riots broke out in different parts of the world, the question of integration quickly became, in parts of Europe, even more prominent. The usual commentators were quick to point to the glaring difference between the freedom of expression respected and enjoyed in Europe, in contrast with its place in Muslim cultures. It provided as yet another opportunity to demonstrate the essential difference between Islam and Europe.

### Freedom of expression

As freedom of expression became an integration issue, it took on a very different meaning. It became the right to hurl insults and denigrate the sacred symbols of a large number of people. The freedom of expression was, thereby, transformed from the right to express oneself in the midst of a powerful state or institution to a right directed at some of the weakest segments of society. The glaring contradiction of this European virtue was also revealed in the ongoing trial in Austria against David Irving's Holocaust views.

I do not mean to suggest, by this, that the freedom to write critically about religion and its values should be controlled by law. On the contrary, freedom of expression against non-state actors such as radical Muslims presents a challenge to people living in all parts of the world. The European integration question, however, framed the freedom of expression as a unique European value under singular threat from Islam. A little reflection, however, shows that Europe is far from exceptional in facing this challenge.

But the focus on Islam as the main culprit in this issue cannot be summarily dismissed. Unlike the French riots, the conflict deals clearly with both a theological and a religious level. Unlike the radical groups who were causing havoc in Amsterdam and elsewhere, this controversy concerns more than a small group of radical Muslims. The cartoon issue brings virtually all Muslims under the spotlight, and places Islam in the centre of the debate.

### Can Islam change?

A deeper reflection on the aftermath and responses to the cartoons forces, once more, into the open a recurring question at the heart of the integration debate. Can Islam adapt itself to Europe? Is it flexible enough to adopt the secular liberal values of Europe? Almost all sides of the debate work with the assumption that Islam belongs to a traditional culture that has resisted change and modernization. In particular, European secular fundamentalists and Muslims radicals thrive

**The caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten have certainly taken on different meanings since they were first printed in September 2005. In Europe, the larger debate about the integration of Islam and Muslims became the framework for the discourse on this most recent controversy over Islam and Muslims. Nevertheless, the cartoon controversy provides an opportunity to question this framework as it both obscures as much as it clarifies the public debate on the controversy in particular, and about Islam in general.**

But secularism for them only implied the freedom to insult religions, particularly Islam. This caricature of secularism has become integrated into Islam in public debate. Among other things, it successfully obscures from view the huge failure of religious (particularly Islamic) states in the second half of the twentieth century.

Another such feature of public Islam thrown up in the controversy is its progressive desacralization. Apart from the newspapers that rushed to reprint the cartoons to demonstrate their commitment to freedom of expression, Muslims themselves played an equally large role in spreading the reach of cartoons. Emails were sent around the globe to gather support for the protest actions, but, ironically, in many cases these very emails contained all the cartoons. The first Egyptian newspaper that carried the story of the cartoons also carried one of the cartoons on its front page. The protests have in more ways than one reproduced the caricatures, and demonstrated some of the desacralization at work in public Islam.

Thirdly, and in relation to this, the image of the Prophet became as important for many Muslims as it had been for the cartoonists. In the last few decades, Muslims have become preoccupied by the bad image that they enjoyed in the press and in public representation in general. The cartoons illustrated this negative image in graphic detail. But the reactions pointed out to how deep-seated the representation of Islam had been internalized as a component of public Islam. The image had become everything.

The integration debate in Europe clearly framed and shaped the reception of the controversy. Under its distorting influence, freedom of expression took on a new meaning. But the controversy also manifested the weakness of one of the central assumptions of the integration debate: Islam had to change to accommodate change. It showed that Islam had already changed to take on a new public role. If anything, this should be the starting point of a future debate.

on the vision of an unchanging primordial Islam. The two sides cannot deal with the fact that Islamic radicalism can be both Islamic and European. Ironically, the cartoon controversy has highlighted some of these changes within Islam as represented in the public debate. The controversy illustrated how any form of secular polity has become the natural enemy of Islam. The dossier of the Danish Muslims that was prepared to mobilize world opinion particularly lamented the lack of respect for religions in secular Europe.

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