

Holy War

OLIVIER ROY

THE worldwide uproar over the cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, printed in a Danish newspaper and reprinted across Europe, has little to do with what's in the headlines. In fact, those obscure the real and critical issues at stake. We read that the affair pits the strictures of Islam against Western freedom of expression. In fact, most Muslims are neither more nor less concerned about abuses of that freedom than Christians or Jews. Except for a small fringe of radicals who presume to speak for Islam, mainstream Muslims, especially in Europe, have reacted with impressive moderation to what they rightly see as an outrage. There have been no huge demonstrations on the Continent, no calls for boycotts, no sit-ins, no incitements to violence. There is, however, intense anger and it's important to understand it.

Second: let us be clear. There is no "Muslim exception" when it comes to the abuse of religious symbols. Even in very secular France, the Roman Catholic Church last year won a suit banning a depiction of the Last Supper by a fashion designer who replaced the Apostles with lightly clad women. British Prime Minister Tony Blair last year proposed a new law extending protections against blasphemy to all religions, not just Christianity. He did not succeed but it's significant that he tried.

The important point is that, for mainstream European Muslims, last week's protests represent a call for equality and integration, not separation or special treatment. Moreover, this is very much an ongoing trend. Europe's Muslims have long allied with other faiths to defend common moral values. In France, to cite but one of many examples, the Catholic bishops, the Grand Rabbinate and Protestant churchmen quickly came together to denounce the cartoons and issued supportive communiques. Again, the issue is not Islam versus free speech. It's the common drive by Western religious leaders, Christian or otherwise, to win some protection against what they see as blasphemy and the denigration of belief. It comes down to respect. If the cartoons had portrayed the prophet doing good works, the proscription against representation would have been muted if not at all.

This does not excuse the violence that erupted throughout the Muslim world. Protest is also a freedom of expression but not the use of force or the pressure of threats. And it is essential to recognize the provenance of these polemics, for they reflect a discernible political agenda.

Consider the Arab ambassadors in Copenhagen, who first thrust the affair into the international arena by calling on the Danish government to punish the publisher. It defies belief that such secular regimes as Syria would be so deeply



PHOTO: AP

outraged in their religious sensitivity. The condemnation, of course, sprang from more pragmatic interests to be on the right side of religious fervor, to deprive their own internal enemies (largely militant Islamists) of a weapon and to maintain leverage over their own immigrant communities in Europe. The Islamic university of Al Azhar in Cairo routinely offers its services to train "moderate" imams for Europe who issue fatwas on specific issues concerning European Muslims. And it strongly opposes the London-based European Council of Fatwa, which

believes Muslim minorities should adapt to their adoptive communities and live by new rules Islam Lite, if you will.

Such meddling from the Arab "motherland" has grown more and more unpopular among European Muslims, however liberal or conservative. In fact, many Muslim leaders and intellectuals suggest that Europe is an opportunity for Islam to modernize, precisely because Muslims there enjoy freedoms unknown in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria or Saudi Arabia. That fact figures large in their response to the cartoon flap: they under-

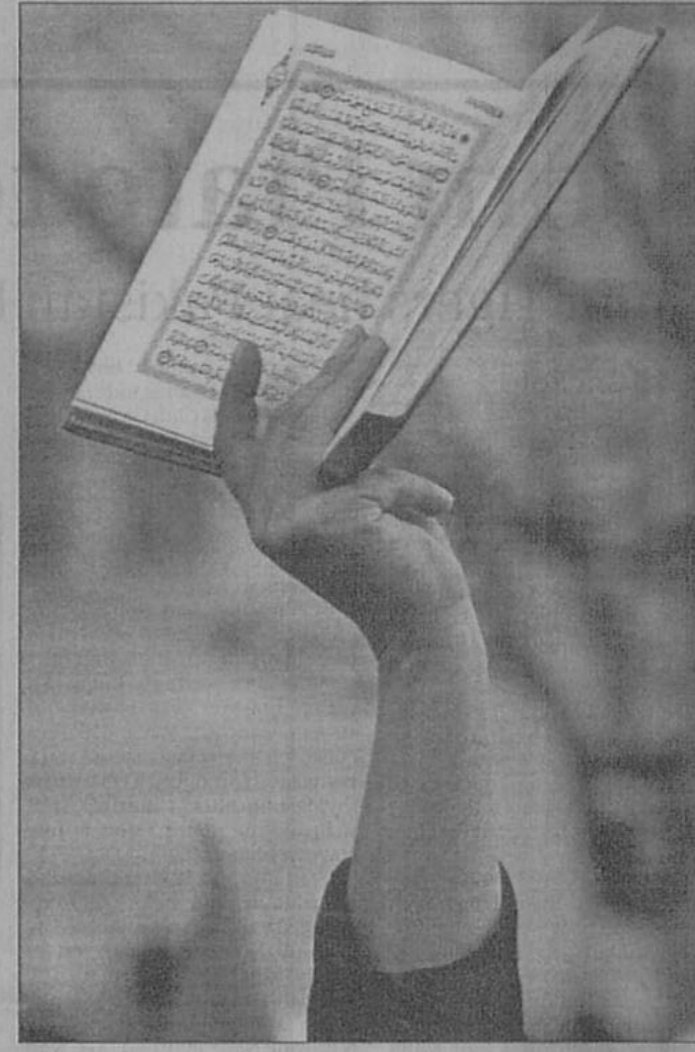


stand that the price to be paid for this freedom is to accept its use by others, however repellent its expression.

Of course, it's precisely this freedom that Arab governments are trying to suppress under the pretense of protecting Islam. In this context, it's interesting to note who among Europe's Muslims are leading the protests. Many supposedly fundamentalist groups have remained relatively quiet, while the crusade against the publishers has been taken up by such moderates as the chairman of the French Muslim Council, Dalil Boubakeur,

who enjoys very close links with the Algerian government. Politics plays a bigger role than religion, in other words. By the same token, Arab authoritarians in Syria and Egypt are using the polemics to gain legitimacy, even as they repress opponents in the Muslim Brotherhood.

Popular protests in the Muslim world, particularly the Middle East, are similarly politicized. It is not by chance that the outcry was strongest in three places where the European Union is most involved. Palestinians in Gaza found a good opportunity to slam the European



reluctance to acknowledge the electoral victory of Hamas, not to mention loosen the purse strings on financial aid. In Pakistan, the same religious coalition that supports the Taliban and Al Qaeda seized upon the cartoon affair as an opportunity to attack Europe and NATO for progressively replacing U.S. troops in Afghanistan. And Syria is taking revenge for Western pressure to leave Lebanon.

The worst lesson to draw from last week's brouhaha has already become the most common: that it represents a deep "clash of civilizations." Not true. Instead of demon-

strating the unity of the Muslim world, the protests underscore its division: a recidivist old guard determined to protect its power and hidden interests versus the growing community of modernist Muslims. They consider themselves first and foremost to be Europeans and they quite simply do not want to be treated as immigrants, or insulted.

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Igniting more than debate

Back in September 2005, the liberal Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published several cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad -- at least one as a terrorist -- although any physical representation of the prophet is forbidden in Islam. There was no immediate backlash, but last week, after several other European newspapers reprinted the cartoons, the reaction went global. Muslims from Jakarta to Istanbul took to the streets in protest, while editors from France to Jordan were dismissed because of their decisions to run the drawings. Newsweek's Charles Ferro spoke with Flemming Rose, the Jyllands-Posten editor who made the original decision to publish the cartoons, about his actions, the reaction and the bigger issues at stake -- freedom of speech and religious sensitivity.



Ferro: What was your thinking behind the decision to publish the Muhammad cartoons back in September?
Rose: I was concerned about a tendency toward self-censorship among people in artistic and cultural circles in Europe. That's why I commissioned these cartoons, to test this tendency and to start a debate about it. It was not a media stunt. We just approached that story in a different way, by asking Danish cartoonists to draw Muhammad as they see him. I did not ask for caricatures. I did not ask to make the prophet a laughingstock or to mock him.
But you depicted Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, armed with a knife and with a broken halo that resembled satanic horns.
The cartoon with horns didn't arouse special criticism; it was the other two. The one with the bomb in his turban doesn't say, "All Muslims are terrorists," but says, "Some people have taken Islam hostage to permit terrorist and extremist acts." These cartoons do not treat Muslims in any other way than we treat other citizens in this country. By treating them as equals, we are saying, "You are equal."
Why do you think Muslims are expressing such outrage now, when other religiously offensive

cartoons have been published in the past?
I think you have to separate this story into two parts. One part (is the debate) inside Danish borders -- that has been going on for four months. On the (one) hand, what does freedom of religion imply, what does respect for other people's feelings and religions imply? You have different points of view, and I think it's problematic if any religion -- it doesn't matter if it's Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, any religion -- tries to impose its own taboos on the public domain.
When I go to a mosque, I behave by the rules that exist in that holy house. I will not stand up and make a cartoon of the holy prophet in a mosque. But I think if any religion insists that I, as a non-Muslim, should submit to their taboos, then I don't think they're showing me respect. I think they're asking for my submission. This is a key issue in this debate.
You (also) have the international story, and I believe it has little to do with our cartoons. The people in Saudi Arabia and some other countries who have started the action have never seen the cartoons. They are acting on false rumors, misinformation and direct lies.
What does this controversy say about assimilation, or lack thereof, in Europe?
This is a clash of cultures and, in its

essence, a debate about how much the receiving society should be willing to compromise its own standards in order to integrate foreigners. On the other hand, how much does the immigrant have to give up in order to be integrated?
Yours is a small Danish paper. Yet your actions had big global ramifications. What does this tell you about how instantly connected the world is today?
This is the first time I've witnessed a story in a newspaper with a circulation of 150,000, in a country of just above 5 million people, becoming a global issue. This is a challenge. It means that what you do in a secular, modern democracy may offend people in some parts of the world, people not living in this type of society. I think it would be unfortunate if people in Saudi Arabia or some parts of the world influenced what we speak about in Denmark. (But) it's a fact of globalization, and we must consider it.
But you tried to influence what happens in Saudi Arabia via the messages in the cartoons.
No, I'm not doing that. This story was about what was going on in Denmark and Northern Europe. So where do you draw the line between censorship and freedom of speech?
My newspaper has its limits. In a pluralistic society where you do have freedom of speech, my limits should not be the limits of others. We do have laws against racism and blasphemy.
Didn't your newspaper commit blasphemy by depicting Muhammad?
Danish prosecutors determined around a month ago that the cartoons were not blasphemous. Will Jyllands-Posten apologize?
For what?

RCG not NCG

Ahmed was made President of the country in AL period (1996-2001). Another election took place in 1996 under Retired Chief Justice Habibur Rahman as the Chief Advisor of the NCG. That election, too, was accorded with appreciation. As usual, the then main opposition party complained of anomalies, but the reactions were not of a serious nature. Admittedly, these two elections held under Shahabuddin Ahmed and Habibur Rahman heralded new hopes and the nation was set to settle down. The confidence reposed in the judiciary also paid off. Consequently, it became rather a golden rule that a man from the judiciary is the appropriate person for the post of Chief Advisor.
Arguably, disenchantment with the people of the judiciary seems to have taken place in recent times. Now, the proposition is being put forward that any person from the civil society -- not necessarily a person from the judiciary -- can become the Chief Advisor of the NCG. One is tempted to delve into the projected rationale behind such thinking.
Retired Chief Justice Latifur Raman was the Chief Advisor of the NCG under whose supervision

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I have a bad habit of working late into the night. Occasionally some brain-wave will strike and I'll call up a friend, regardless of the hour. Last weekend, an e-mail arrived about a project in Germany -- a short film I was working on with a colleague would be shown there. But which German city, Frankfurt or Munich, we had to decide.
Without a second thought, I dialed my colleague. It was after midnight, free minutes were on (yes, those soon to disappear "moral corrupters"), I didn't think much of the hour.
"Ke? Ke?" The startled voice on the other end brought to mind the Bangla slang dhofor.
"It's me, Naeem, sorry, ghum theke jagalam?"
"No, it's OK, just not expecting a call at this hour!"
"Listen, it's late, I just have a quick question. There is some news from Germany and we have to make a decision."
He quickly interrupted, "Let's talk about it in person, kalke hobe."
"But we have to give them a decision quickly, let me just explain..."
"Na, na, kalke kotha hobe..."
"But..."
"Etho bujhai bolthe hobe naki? Not on the phone!" He practically growled the last phrase.

I understood, and quietly said my goodbyes and hung up. We made plans to meet later in the week, no harm done.
January 2006. It has been only a few days since the government approved the amendment to the Telecommunications Act to allow spying on phone calls and e-mails. But people are already getting adjusted to the new realities. Instead of protesting, citizens are just cooperating. Anything to get along, move on in life, as long as the business is fine, we are all good. The phone has now become a liability. You never know what phrase can be misinterpreted. Next thing you know, there will be a knock on your door. Even harmless, apolitical conversations like deciding a screening venue in Germany has been flooded. Not safe for public consumption.
"This is nothing new," says an activist friend, "tikiki have always been listening to us. This just makes it legal, means they can bring phone transcripts to court."
Tikiki.
I remember being ten and first reading that word in a Kiriti Ray detective novel. I found the whole book to be in dath-bhanga Bangla (I was ten), how did my parents enjoy this so much? I preferred Satyajit Ray's Feluda with a modernist flair. Anyway, on page 5 I came across the sentence: "Tikiki piche legeche" and asked my

mother for an explanation.
Tikiki was a lizard but also a spy. How exciting. Did he have a tail, did it grow back if you chopped it off?
Who knew tikiki would become a source for fear?
Remember 1970s Dhaka, when Lal Bahini and Rokkhi Bahini prowled the streets, trying to flush out the underground cadres of Gono Bahini and Sharbahara Party. Spies and informants were everywhere, neighbours reported each other to settle scores -- kidnapping by "security" forces and "crossfire" executions were the norm. How little things have changed in thirty years! Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) in 2006 looks a lot like Rokkhi Bahini in 1974. Today, when I see photographs of arrested JMB militants, surrounded by fierce looking Rab men in sunglasses, bandannas, black clothes, and machine guns, I don't know who I should be more afraid of. Will JMB blow me up when I am shopping in Newmarket, or will Rab kill me in crossfire because of mistaken identity, or a misinterpreted phone call?
Along with Rab enforcers, we have the dreaded spies, listening to every conversation in our ether. Looking for evidence of terror plots they say, but how many of those recorded conversations will be used to harass, intimidate, and wreck lives?

When the government's surveillance move first started, I wrote four editorials on the subject. In one of the earlier pieces, I put in a hopeful appeal that not just citizens, but also cell phone companies would resist these new surveillance laws. A friend who is a cell phone entrepreneur read the draft and said: "Yes, but governments that can shut down private television company can do anything to cell phone companies. All they have to do is give a dhomok and threaten to cancel their license."
But surely, I thought, the companies would fight back. They would use their economic might to protest surveillance laws that are bad for human rights and business? Elsewhere in the world, many battles are brewing between spies and business. Recently, Google refused to comply with federal requests for user data, but Microsoft and Yahoo agreed. An hour after reading that news item, I got a mass e-mail from my friend Sujani -- she was switching her yahoo e-mail to google in protest. People power in action! But Google doesn't get off the hook either. In China, Google agreed to authority's demands for censoring websites. In protest, activist groups have launched a Valentine's Day: "No Luv 4 Google" program which urges consumers to boycott Google.
Do we trust our government

(BNP or AL) to do the right thing when it comes to surveillance? Will they use this power to harass politicians, silence activists and blackmail ordinary citizens? Will they push a bureaucratic, political and moral agenda under the guise of law enforcement? What does our past history tell us?
People are taking no chances anyway. Like my friend the other night, there are now abrupt conversations, hushed tones, scared silences. Best not to say anything, even innocent conversations can be twisted around.
After a 35-year journey as an independent country, is this what it has come down to? To return to a condition where we have fewer rights than in those first horrific years after independence?
I thought again of my friend, Bujhai bolthe hobe naki? People seem to be bent over in fear. As if bringing your body closer and closer to the ground will give you armour to protect from the tyranny of governments.
There are two choices in our coming future. Keep giving in (but whatever you give will never be enough). Or speak up to defend your own rights, starting with the surveillance laws.
Which side will you be on?
Naeem Mohajeman is director of DisappearedinAmerica.org, an arts collective that looks at post-9/11 civil liberties and surveillance.

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