

Context and “The Faces of Muhammad”

By: J.R. Wudel

Jyllands-Posten culture editor, Flemming Rose, elicited over 40 Danish cartoonists to draw Muhammad as they saw him. On September 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper published a series of editorial cartoons parodying the Islamic prophet Muhammad entitled “Muhammeds ansigt,” or “The Faces of Muhammad.” The 12 cartoons and editorial resulted from Rose’s intention in publishing the editorial as a response to the issue of self-censorship brought up in an article published by the *Jyllands-Posten*’s sister newspaper, the *Politiken*. The *Politiken*’s article discussed the difficulty a local author and journalist, Kåre Bluitgen, had in finding an artist to illustrate his latest project, a children’s book about the Koran and the life of the prophet Muhammad, for fear of violent Muslim reprisals. Two of the artists approached mentioned the recent murder of film director Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam and attack on the lecturer at the Carsten Niebuhr Institute in Copenhagen (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”). “The Faces of Muhammad” came at a time of much hostility and tension between the secular, democratic countries of the World and the Nation of Islam, particularly Muslim extremists.

The printing of “The Faces of Muhammad” foreshadowed and shaped the historical events that would follow. In haunting, or unfortunately anticipated, fashion the cartoons brought about a reaction and behavior that the cartoons disturbingly depicted. Danish Muslims protested in formal and legal response to the cartoons, calling them culturally insensitive and blasphemous (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”). In Islamic countries, violent protests resulted in over 140 deaths, nearly six times as many injuries and even the burning of one Danish Embassy (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”). The Controversy surrounding the cartoons grew. Newspapers in more than 50 other countries reprinted the cartoons, resulting in several newspapers being closed and editors fired or arrested (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). Even Flemming Rose received a suspension—not for printing “The Faces of Muhammad,” but in conjunction with the printing of further cartoons during the height of the controversy. Some countries supporting Islam began a boycott of Danish Products which led to a boycott in some European countries of those countries boycotting Denmark. “Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Danish Prime Minister who has been burnt in effigy in dozens of cities across the world since the crisis began in late January, has called the furore Denmark's worst international relations incident since the Second World War” (Times Online...).

An understanding of past historical events provides crucial insight into the media presentation. Throughout the history of the Islamic faith, Muslims considered it the highest crime to insult the Prophet Muhammad. In many cases this warranted death. Contemporary Sunni Muslims, the largest denomination

of Islam, generally forbid any pictorial representation of Muhammad. By the 19th century, the nations of Islam, from the Atlantic to central Asia, “had fallen under the sway of European political and economic power” (“Islam”). Since World War One, and throughout the 20th Century, Islam and Islamic political power rose. However, the relationship between the West and the Islamic world remains uneasy (“Islam”). Struggle for increased Muslim political control often results in horrendous violence. In Western media, finding news relaying this uneasy relationship and the latest example of ‘Muslim Terror’ presents no difficulty. “The Faces of Muhammad” proves one more example.

“The Faces of Muhammad” editorial and cartoons contain many historical references which affect the audience’s understanding of the presentation. Many of the points made within the cartoons can only be ascertained by an understanding of the historical and cultural context behind the tension between Islam and the West, and the nature of Islam itself. The original publication contained symbolism and Danish text requiring research by the average American into other media sources for further understanding. Translations proliferate the world-wide-web. The one page spread of “The Faces of Muhammad” placed Rose’s editorial in the center surrounded by the 12 cartoons. Individual examination of the editorial and twelve cartoons reveals their historical and cultural scope.

The editorial by Flemming Rose comments, in Danish, on the incongruous nature of some Muslim beliefs and what Rose calls, “The modern, secular society” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). Rose believes that these Muslims “demand a special position, insisting on special consideration of their own religious feelings... incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). According to Rose, in this contemporary environment “you must be ready to put up with insults, mockery and ridicule” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). Rose feels that making fun of religious feelings doesn’t come with a price, unless discussing the ultimately more important, and potentially devastating, theory of self-censorship (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). In answer to further comment about the editorial, Rose said that his comments and the cartoons welcomed Muslim’s into Danish and Western society—the cartoons meant as an affectionate elbow in the ribs (“The Story...”).

The first cartoon holds its place, also in the center of the presentation, along with Rose’s editorial. Cartoonist, Annette Carlsen (all the artists’ names were omitted from the original editorial), depicts a police line-up of seven individuals wearing turbans, all smiling except numbers “3” and “5”. On the other side of the window, a blond male witness, wearing a sport coat, says, “Hm... I can’t really recognize him” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). From left to right, in the line-up are, (1) a bearded hippie, (2) Pia Kjaersgaard (the Political Leader of the Danish People’s Party), (3) Jesus, (4) Buddha, (5) Mohammed, (6) an Indian Guru, and (7) Kåre Bluitgen (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). Bluitgen holds a sign that reads, “Kåre’s public relations, call and get an offer” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”).

Above the left corner of this cartoon sits the next depiction by Peder Bundgaard—a black inking of Muhammad’s face, complete with beard and turban, merged with a green star and crescent. The star covers Muhammad’s right eye. The crescent surrounds his beard and face from under his neck to the top of his turban.

Moving clockwise, artist Kurt Westergaard’s depiction of the face of Muhammad, depicts a black inking of a wild-eyed Muhammad with a bomb, the fuse lit, as his turban. An inscription on the bomb reads the Shahadah, or Islamic Creed. The creed declares a belief in the oneness of Allah and in Muhammad as his messenger (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). This depiction caused some of the greatest controversy. When questioned about his motives, Westergaard said that he tried to express his contempt for the radical Muslim extremists that use their belief in Allah as the fuel for their heinous acts of terrorism (“The Story...”).

In the right corner of the publication stands Paul Erik Poulsen’s caricature of Muhammad. The body and face look gentle and innocent. However, in relation to his turban hovers either a glowing crescent halo or sprouting horns, depending on the viewers perspective.

Below Poulsen’s depiction artist Erik Abild Sørensen offers his. The work contains five nearly identical line figures. The figure resembles the profile of a head donning a headscarf, with the Star of David as the eye and crescent swooping to form the mouth. A poem to the left of the figures reads, “Prophet, you crazy bloke! Keeping women under the yoke!” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”) or, “Prophet! Daft and Dumb, keeping woman under thumb” (“Who’s Your...”).

Claus Sidel’s cartoon froms the next cartoon down the left side of the publication. It depicts Muhammad in the desert, walking stick in one hand and a rope tied to a donkey carrying his load behind him in the other. A bright pink sun sits low in the horizon on his left. The depiction compares to events within the life of Muhammad. A merchant in his early life, he and his followers faced persecution and fled from Mecca, their home. This resulted in the 320 km migration north of Mecca.

The bottom right corner of the page shows the next cartoon by Arne Sørensen. In a scarcely lit room, an artist nervously sketches the face of a bearded man in a keffiyeh, or headscarf, labeled “Mohammad,” under the glow of a single lamp above him. The artist sweats profusely and tries to conceal his drawing with his left hand.

The cartoon in the bottom center reveals Franz Füchsel’s scene in an Islamic palace. Two angry Muslims charge forward from the left. One carries a raised scimitar and the other a bomb. Presumably, their leader stands in the foreground on the left. One of his hands raises to stop the others’ charge. In his other hand he holds what can be taken as a newspaper. Looking at the newspaper he cries, “Relax, friends, at the end of the day, it’s just a drawing by a “South Jutlander” infidel...” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”) or,

“Easy my friends, when it comes to the point it is only a drawing made by a non-believing Dane...” (“Who’s Your...”).

The bottom left corner of the editorial displays the cartoon from Lars Refn. Labeled as Mohammed, and a 7th grader from Valby School, a boy stands in front of a chalkboard sticking his tongue out. He points to Persian text that reads, “The editorial team of Jyllands-Posten is a bunch of reactionary provocateurs” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). Some have inferred that the boy “is the second generation child of immigrants to Denmark rather than the founder of Islam” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). The boy wears a shirt that resembles the uniform of a Valby football team. Valby is a suburb of Copenhagen. The shirt reads “FREM” and then a new line below it, “-Tiden.” “Fremtiden” means “the future, but “frem,” meaning “forward,” is also the name of a football team. Refn received the first death threats after publication, forcing him to leave his home in Valby.

Above Refn’s cartoon perches another portrayal of Muhammad, this one by Rasmus Sand Høyer. Muhammad stands in the foreground, scimitar in hand and ready for battle. On either side behind him stand two women dressed in hijabs, the traditional cover of Muslim women, only their wide eyes are visible. The hijab, and its use of covering Muslim women from head to toe, has its roots in the Qur’an. Within the traditional Muslim text, passages express the importance of women to retain their modesty in public by covering themselves. A black bar, seemingly cut from the eye slots in the hijab, covers the eyes of Muhammad (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”).

In the next cartoon, from artist Jens Julius, the action seemingly takes place in Heaven. Muhammad, dressed like a Mullah, the Islamic Clergy, raises his arms to halt the progression of dead suicide bombers, smoke still rising from their bodies. Muhammad shouts, “Stop, Stop, we have run out of virgins!” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”). This quote references the reward of seventy-two virgins promised to Islamic martyrs (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”).

In the top, left corner of the publication hangs the final cartoon, an offering from an artist only labeled as Bob. It caricatures Kåre Bluitgen wearing both a turban and a goofy smile. In his left hand he raises a sheet of paper containing a stick drawing of Muhammad. An orange has fallen from the sky and landed in Bluitgen’s turban with “PR-STUNT” written on it. In Danish, the proverb “an orange in the turban” is an expression similar to “a stroke of luck” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh”).

Within the framework of cultural context, these cartoons and editorial present a worldview that pits the Danish whit of the pen v the Muslim scimitar. An ideology that retains, as stereotype, that the value of violence and terror as a means to secure political power drives Muslims. It expresses that Muslim men extend their quest for power even over woman, who they keep covered from head to toe, and “under the thumb.” But, the cartoons give no mention of the value of modesty Muslims are trying to secure.

Instead, it only ridicules their blind faith that seemingly resulted in a culture lost in the desert. As an alternative to these fundamentalist Islamic principles, we receive the beliefs of Denmark and the Western World—a system of beliefs that politics supplanted religion. The criticism of others and by twisting the media to advertise your latest product becomes the only way to success.

Taken as a whole, “The Faces of Muhammad” depicts a pessimistic view of Life. Flemming Rose’s editorial comes as a sort of call to arms, or ink in this case, against the Nation of Islam. Granted, his well-grounded feelings react to years of hostility against the West by Muslims, but what caused their hostility? The cartoons cry of a world locked in conflict—a world that chooses sides between the violent, sexist zealots and the conniving, disrespectful capitalist. In this world we can only find happiness in tearing down another’s customs, and if you’re Muslim, even in death, you’ll never be happy unless you, and especially your youth, conform to the Danish sense of free speech and insult.

In the editorial only those residing in a secular society have control of their own destinies. Free speech entitles the creators of this work to choose how they will respond to the issue of self-censorship. Even a woman has the ability to possess the powers of God, evident by the placing of Pia Kjærsgaard, the Political Leader of the Danish People’s Party, on the same scale as Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad. Muslims, on the other hand, put their destinies in the hands of Allah and abide by his laws as expressed by Muhammad, his messenger. As a result, they become blinded by their faith and driven to excessive violence as a means of securing their ends.

An examination of the ownership patterns and structure of the *Jyllands-Posten* offers an interesting spin on the controversy surrounding the Muhammad cartoons. The *Jyllands-Posten* represents an independent liberal-conservative newspaper and Denmark’s largest selling newspaper. Since 2003, a foundation called Jyllands-Posten Holding and Politiken Holdin owned the *Jyllands-Posten* in equal parts. Politiken Holding publishes the *Politiken*, the newspaper that published the original story on self-censorship that “The Faces of Muhammad” reacted to, and the tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*. The Politiken makes it its goal to relay information about social liberalism in Danish Politics. The merged company JP/Politikens Hus’ other businesses also include book publishing, printing, local newspapers in Denmark and Sweden and a number of multi-media concerns (“Jyllands-Posten”). With the largest circulation among Denmark’s newspapers, it can be guaranteed that the *Jyllands-Posten* represents the status quo of the nation. Each of the three newspapers under JP/Politikens Hus’ hold individual control over their editorial content. However, their ties and effort to support themselves through cross-promotion seems obvious in this situation. The goal of “The Faces of Muhammad” editorial could have been a public relations stunt to bolster more sales for the two major papers within JP/Politikens Hus’.

The Danish government values the right of free speech with the same respect as America. Within the Danish Criminal Code exists laws against blasphemy and public insult which, respectively, “prohibits disturbing public order by publicly ridiculing or insulting the dogmas of worship of any lawfully existing religious community in Denmark” and “criminalizes insult, threat or degradation of natural persons, by publicly and with malice attacking their race, color of skin, national or ethnical roots, faith or sexual orientation.” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”). Groups of Danish Muslims filed complaints with local police on these grounds. However, the investigation was discontinued two months later by the Regional Public Prosecutor finding “no basis for concluding that the cartoons constituted a criminal offense” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”). The prosecutor based his reasoning on “Danish case law which extends editorial freedom to journalists when it comes to a subject of public interest” (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”). The Director of Public Prosecutors in Denmark later upheld that reasoning (“Jyllands-Posten Muh...”).

Regardless of the intentions of Flemming Rose and the *Jyllands-Posten*, as publicity stunt or critical comment on the subject of self-censorship in the face of extremist threat, “The Faces of Muhammad” exemplifies how a media presentation reflects and shapes the events of our time. It cries of the pervasiveness of modern mass media—its ability to enter our homes and lives and influence how we view our world. The resulting controversy stresses the role of journalists as those with the authority to shape society’s views of the many world cultures and how they co-exist. To those journalists, it serves as a warning to truly evaluate their personal values and bias—should they simply react to their observations of the world, or observe and react in a manner that will try to promote goodwill, not hostility? How journalists and all of today’s media presenters choose to answer that question will ultimately effect the actions of society tomorrow, especially as a result of the cultural transmission of values and stereotypes to our world’s youth.

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