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Danish Cartoon Controversy

Anfal Yesmein Nyhan

¹On September 19th, 2005 as a means of bridging cultural barriers in a local setting, the editors of a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, decided to “assimilate” Muslims in Denmark into Danish culture by integrating them into a long-standing tradition of satire. This task was initiated through an assignment that asked Danish illustrators to portray their interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad. *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve caricatures of the Prophet, some of which were neutral, and others, overwhelmingly negative. Instead of achieving the intended goal of assimilation, illustrations of Muhammad as a devilish bomb-turbaned figure, for example, further perpetuated the stereotypical view of Islam as an aggressive tradition and cheapened the image of the Prophet in the eyes of believers and non-believers. This paper argues that the Danish cartoons should not have been published. By portraying the Prophet Muhammad in a largely negative light, the illustrations exacerbated the challenges to assimilation faced by the Muslim community and fed into stereotypes of the Islamic tradition.

The publication of these twelve cartoons was justified as a means of assimilating Muslims into Denmark. Instead *Jyllands-Posten* clearly misunderstood the position of Muslim immigrants in Danish society and alienated Muslims by propagating a negative image of Islam. ²Fleming Rose, the cultural editor at *Jyllands-Posten*, argued that by commissioning and publishing these caricatures the newspaper was “treating Muslims in Denmark as equals” by integrating them into the “Danish tradition of satire.” This claim suggested that Muslims in Denmark were not integrated into Danish culture until the publication of the cartoons. Many Muslims, however, were already an integrated aspect of the European west. ³“In the heat of controversy it was forgotten that large majorities of Muslims were very supportive of European political institutions—elections, governments, and the police—and, according to some opinion surveys, more trusting of those institutions than was the general population.” Yet many Europeans, like some of the cartoonists who submitted entries to *Jyllands-Posten*, believed that Muslims were at war with Western values. Radicalism and extremism are a minority phenomenon. The idea that extremism is the ideology of the majority of Muslims is the product of 21st century sensationalist media that perpetuates the idea of Islam as an aggressive, extremist religious faith. ⁴These cartoons added “more very real injury to an already badly injured world.” The artists utilized the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as a means of expressing what they believed to be the fundamental aspects of Islam, violence. ⁵One of the images, for example, displayed an angry prophet with a “bomb inscribed with the Islamic creed merged with his turban.” The artist of this caricature later clarified his intentions by saying that the illustration

¹ Klausen, Jytte. "Introduction." *The Cartoons That Shook the World*. New Haven & London: Yale UP. 1. Print.

² Klausen, Jytte. "Introduction." *The Cartoons That Shook the World*. New Haven & London: Yale UP. 13-18. Print.

³ Klausen, Jytte. "Introduction." *The Cartoons That Shook the World*. New Haven & London: Yale UP. 3. Print.

⁴ Spiegelman, Art. "Drawing Blood - Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage." *Harpers* June 2006: 43. Web.

⁵ Spiegelman, Art. "Drawing Blood - Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage." *Harpers* June 2006: 48. Web.

was directed against the fundamentalist aspects of Islam and that it was meant to show that terrorists get their spiritual ammunition from Islam. The artist conveyed quite reasonably in words the relationship between terrorism and religion; this relationship, however, was unclear in the context of the image since the caricature made it seem as if the Prophet himself was condoning violence. ⁶Another equally demeaning cartoon portrayed an “innocent-looking turbaned figure” with a crescent symbol on the head that symbolized both a halo and horns. This depiction implied that even though the figure appeared to be holy, he was in fact the devil. This second image similarly conveyed the same message as the first, that terrorism is rooted in Islam and in the teachings of Muhammad. These cartoons did not accurately portray the relationship that exists between Islam and extremism (as it does between extremism and other religions), that Muslim extremists extract their ammunition from the foundational sources of the religion not that the foundational sources condone extremism as the end-goal of religion. Thus, these images served no purpose in educating non-Muslim Danes about the Islamic tradition independent of violence. The caricatures did however succeed in one way. ⁷They confirmed the stereotype that Islam is a “stern, glowering, humorless” religion and ⁸“polarized the West into viewing Muslims as the unassimilable Other.”

Humor has its place when it comes to the sacred. Humor, however, cannot be made at the expense of others when dealing with the sacred; it lies on the boundary between the sacred and the profane. ⁹As the scholar Conrad Hyers says, to see humor as a profanation of the sacred is to see it as an “interlude” between the sacred and the profane, “which has its own validity within the religious encounter.” ¹⁰Humor cannot simply exist in the realm of the profane nor can it be seen as the weakening of faith. Humor has its place in between the profane and the sacred where it can enhance the understanding of the sacred. ¹¹Humor as profanity exists when it has passed the “boundary between the sacred and the profane into the realm of the profane, or unfaith.” With respect to the *Jyllands-Posten* caricatures, humor existed only as profanity for the images shed light on only one limited aspect of Islam and moreover, poked fun at the beliefs of Muslims. ¹²Hyers notes that “laughter at the expense of the ideas and traditions holy to others is often but a technique of intolerance and aggression, a convenient instrument of ridicule and sport, or a means of avoiding laughter at ourselves, thereby only reinforcing our own beliefs and conventions.” Thus, this form of humor, which was utilized by the artists of *Jyllands-Posten* to ridicule the holy Prophet at the expense of Muslims is an indication of some Danes’ intolerance with regard to Islam post 9/11 and their inability to let go of the stereotypes that have emerged since then. These cartoons, therefore, shed more light on *Jyllands-Posten*’s bias against Islam

⁶ Spiegelman, Art. "Drawing Blood - Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage." *Harpers* June 2006: 49. Web.

⁷ Maghen, Ze'ev. "The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the Early Days of Islam." *Der Islam Bd.* 83 (2008): 277-340. Web.

⁸ Spiegelman, Art. "Drawing Blood - Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage." *Harpers* June 2006: 43. Web.

⁹ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 23. Print.

¹⁰ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 23. Print.

¹¹ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 24. Print.

¹² Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 25. Print.

rather than on its intended goal of assimilating Muslims into the Danish tradition of satire.¹³ Laughter in relation to the misfortunes that have befallen the Muslim community due to the aggression of Islamic fundamentalists is not only incongruous, but sadistic, because the majority is picking on a minority, the Muslim population of Denmark.¹⁴ Thus, a clear distinction must be drawn between laughter with respect to those things that the majority cherishes as sacred, and those that minorities cherish as sacred.

Humor can, of course, exist within the sacred.¹⁵ The sacred “[in fact] needs the comic as much as the comic needs the sacred; for the comic apart from its basis in the sacred, or the sacred apart from the qualifications of the comic, are equal prey to distortion.” In the absence of humor, the sacred can change itself into absolutism. In the absence of the sacred, humor passes into despair. The two concepts have a direct relationship with each other. The Prophet himself understood that humor needed to be a part of the sacred in order for man to relate to religion.¹⁶ Muhammad “like his maker, was of the opinion that the seriousness of religion had to be softened if it were to maintain its preeminent position in the hearts of men.” The Prophet Muhammad can be portrayed in a humorous light, and in fact he should be, for this gives believers and non-believers a way to relate to him. Muhammad can be seen in many situations personally engaging in humor, as attested to by the literature of hadith (Prophetic traditions).¹⁷ The Prophet “would joke with his Companions, mingle with them, and banter with them.”¹⁸ One can see the Apostle of God enjoying slapstick scenes where he advises friends and family members on reproductive issues and instances where the Messenger of God engages in prankish mayhem like friendly food fights are also common in the hadith. Humor is an integral part of Muhammad’s legacy, but one of the problems with the Danish cartoons was that the caricatures did not accurately depict the relationship between the sacred and humor. The caricatures instead mocked the holy image of the Prophet Muhammad in the eyes of both believers and non-believers.¹⁹ The importance of the Prophet for the Islamic tradition is incalculably greater than one might suppose: while the Qur’an, as divine revelation, may be the most important source for the Islamic tradition, it would not have been in its present form without the Prophet Muhammad, who is viewed as the bearer of revelation and the perfect moral exemplar.²⁰ Because of the unique spiritual position that Muhammad holds and his role as a model for ethics, law, family life, politics, and spirituality, the Prophet is highly revered in the Islamic community. Many of

¹³ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 25. Print.

¹⁴ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 25. Print.

¹⁵ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 209. Print.

¹⁶ Maghen, Ze'ev. "The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the Early Days of Islam." *Der Islam Bd.* 298 (2008): 277-340. Web.

¹⁷ Maghen, Ze'ev. "The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the Early Days of Islam." *Der Islam Bd.* 317 (2008): 298. Web.

¹⁸ Maghen, Ze'ev. "The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the Early Days of Islam." *Der Islam Bd.* 333 (2008): 277-340. Web.

¹⁹ Ernst, Carl W. *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004. 74. Print.

²⁰ Ernst, Carl W. *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004. 78. Print.

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the caricatures, however, portrayed Muhammad only as being a source of violence and aggression.

Since these cartoons used humor to demean the weak, they did not succeed in either assimilating Danish Muslims into Danish culture or teaching non-Muslim Danes about the Islamic tradition. If the publishers of *Jyllands-Posten* were actually interested in assimilating Muslims into Western culture through humor, they could have achieved this task in a better fashion, because humor does have a place in Islam. Humor in the West in relation to other religious figures is less damaging because other religions are not overwhelmingly stereotyped in the same way as Islam in the present day. Jesus Christ, for example, is often portrayed by some in demeaning ways for the sake of humor. Though this type of humor is insulting to many and cheapens the holy image of Jesus, it is less damaging because most people do not buy into stereotypes regarding Christians. The image of Christianity has not been tarnished by the actions of extremist minorities in the Christian community. In the caricatures of Muhammad, however, the Prophet was portrayed as the source of aggression and terrorism. Since many non-Muslims are not knowledgeable about Islamic principles, these images feed into popular stereotypes of Islam that arose as a result of the acts of Muslim extremists. Furthermore, humor in relation to Christ is made about the majority by the majority. In the case of the *Jyllands-Posten* illustrations, however, the caricatures were made about the minority by the majority. In this case, the Danish publishers, who belong to the majority, were commenting at the expense of the minority, the Muslim community.²¹ Laughter at the cost of the minority is inappropriate, because the more powerful majority is scoffing at the weaknesses of the minority.

The caricatures of Muhammad posted by *Jyllands-Posten* only provoked existing stereotypes surrounding Islam in the 21st century. They served no real purpose; neither did they allow a medium for Danish Muslims to assimilate into Danish culture and nor did they allow non-Muslim Danes to accurately understand Islam. Humor is a part of the sacred as much as the sacred is a part of the humorous; one cannot exist without the other, and Muhammad is in fact associated with humor in the hadith. It was through humor that Muhammad's followers related to the Prophet. The question in this case was not if humor and Islam can co-exist, because they do, but whether the Danish cartoons depicted a positive relationship between Islam and humor. The caricatures, however, mocked the Prophet and those who believe in him, falsely characterized Muhammad as the source of violence of Muslim extremists today, and fed into existing stereotypes of Islam.

²¹ Hyers, M. Conrad. *Holy Laughter; Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*,. New York: Seabury, 1969. 25. Print.

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