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### Terror as a Persuasive Medium in the Attack on Free Speech

Few will forget the Danish cartoon scandal of 2006. Images of violent riots by millions of offended Muslims spanning the globe consumed the media during months following the publication of 12 cartoons depicting Muhammad, the Islamic prophet, in the Danish paper, *Jyllands-Posten*. Appearing only mildly offensive to most secular observers, the cartoons were apparently offensive enough to devout Muslims to spark a worldwide protest leaving more than 100 dead and 800 injured, flags and buildings in ashes, editors jobless and imprisoned, and cartoonists in hiding and fearing for their lives (Spiegelman 44). Editors were faced with the difficult decision of whether to reprint the cartoons to provide context to their reporting on the protests or to suppress them to avoid adding more fuel to the flame or out of respect for Muslim sensitivities. The overwhelming majority of North American publications chose not to reprint them, usually claiming they chose not to out of respect for the Muslim community. But was the rioting really about the cartoons, or was it an attack on free speech? And were the feelings of Muslims really the main factor influencing editors' decisions – or was it fear? By further examining the cartoons, the Muslim protests and the organization that went on behind them, as well as the Western media's reporting on them, I shall argue that the Danish cartoon riots were not about cartoons at all – Muslim fundamentalists used them to fuel outrage and create fear, which became a powerful tool in an organized effort to attack free speech, and the Western media submitted to that fear.

The 12 cartoons were originally published in late September 2005 after *Jyllands-Posten*'s cultural editor asked artists to depict Muhammad as they perceive him. Some of the artists' perceptions of Muhammad were obviously influenced by the existing public discourse of the "Muslim threat" (Müller and Özcan 287-291). Picking up on the negative undertones, the Danish Muslim community was outraged over the fact that Islam and its prophet were being mocked. However, as cartoonist and writer Art Spiegelman points out in his writing on the issue, "caricature is by definition a charged or loaded image; its wit lies in the visual concision of using a few deft strokes to make its point" (45). Cartoonists must therefore rely on simple recognizable symbols, exaggeration and clichés. Furthermore, the point of the cartoon must derive from a well known issue if it is to be recognizable; so it is no surprise that some of the drawings published in the Danish paper dealt with themes relating to the prevalent discourse of the "Muslim threat," considering the strong feelings the 9/11 terrorist attacks stirred up in the world and the ongoing violence in the Middle East. That is not to say that Muslims should not get offended by the cartoons – but the fact is most good cartoons are offensive to someone in some way or another. Good cartoons point out the absurdity in life, and having ones absurdity pointed out can be offensive to that person or group – even if it is an obvious exaggeration. The most notorious of the cartoons published, and probably the one that caused the most offence, was that of an angry bearded face wearing a turban merged with a bomb. It is not surprising that many Muslims took offence to this image and interpreted it as an attack on Islam as a whole, or as a suggestion that Muhammad is a suicide bomber. However, the artist, Kurt Westergaard, explained his true intentions in an interview with the *Jyllands-Posten*:

The cartoon is not directed against Islam as a whole, but against the part of it that obviously can inspire violence, terrorism, death and destruction. And therefore the fundamentalist aspect of Islam. I wanted to show that terrorists get their spiritual ammunition from Islam. (qtd. in Spiegelman 48)

His explanation is quite reasonable, and there is no doubt that certain parts of Islam have inspired certain fundamentalist Muslims to use violence and terror in the name of religion – just as other religions have inspired similar violence. This is by no means the first time the theme of violence in the name of religion has been pointed out by a cartoon. In fact, it is likely that almost every religion, every political ideology and every group of people have been targets of satirical cartoons at one point or another. Cartoons have been used – and continue to be used – to make political and religious points for centuries, and have often been much more offensive than the 12 Danish cartoons. In fact, following the publication of the Danish cartoons, as Spiegelman points out, Iran hosted an international Holocaust cartoon contest of its own, “as payback, to ‘test’ the limits of Western tolerance of free speech” (51). The resulting cartoons were arguably much more offensive than – if not at least equally offensive as – the Danish cartoons. However, instead of rioting, Jewish artists in Tel Aviv announced their own Israeli anti-Semitic cartoon contest, demonstrating that they can take a joke no matter how offensive it is, that they can laugh at themselves, and most importantly, that free speech takes precedent over shelter from offence. The riots resulting from the Danish cartoons are unprecedented. It is doubtful that the explanation for this outcry is simply the fact that Muslims are much more sensitive than other religious groups. The fact that similar, and even more offensive cartoons, have been published in the past and none have resulted in outcries like the riots that resulted from the Danish cartoons, leads me to conclude that there is much more behind the rioting than outrage over being offended. As I shall argue further, the riots were not about the cartoons themselves, they were a full scale, organized, politically driven attack on free speech.

It was not until four months after the cartoons were originally published that signs of a worldwide protest became apparent – the protest erupted at that time in a single moment. As Lapham writes, four months was “time enough for the promoters of Muslim discontent to organize propaganda campaigns in Europe and the Middle East” (9). In other words, the rioting that took place in February was by no means a spontaneous outcry over the offensiveness of the cartoons. If the riots were truly a reaction to being offended by the cartoons, small pockets of protestors would most likely have appeared much sooner – reacting immediately to viewing the cartoons – and the protests would have spread as more Muslims became aware of the issue; there could not be a sudden worldwide protest unless it was organized. The protest was no-doubt spawned by a small group of Danish Muslims who were genuinely offended by the cartoons, but the true drive behind the worldwide protest changed after they brought the matter to the Middle East, and as Spiegelman writes, “the framework – and even the meaning – of the Danish cartoons in question changed as the context went global and the besieged became the besiegers” (46). In other words, the cartoons became a tool for a political campaign, disguised as an offence that must be protested. The protestors appeared to be defending

themselves from an offensive cartoon, when they are actually attacking the freedom of speech. Most of the individual protestors were most likely genuinely protesting out of outrage over the offensive cartoons, but the ones organizing and pushing for the protests had other goals in mind. Lapham adds insight to this claim, arguing:

the agents provocateurs circulating the incitements to riot had fabricated the worst of the cartoons (most notably the one of the prophet coupling with a dog) and [...] the propaganda campaign had been largely financed by repressive governments, aligned with reactionary and jihadist sentiment in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq, that have little liking, and certainly no respect, for the freedoms of the societies on which they seek to impose, praise be to Allah, the blindfolds of religious superstition. (Lapham 11)

If it is indeed true that those behind the organization of the protest fabricated some of the material, there is no way the actual goal of the riots could have been to protest the content of the cartoons. It would be illogical for them to protest their own content. Also, as Lapham points out, examining who was behind financing the campaign and understanding their feelings of Western values of freedom of speech, brings to light the true intentions of the protest. The fact that this particular protest was on such a large scale and would have required significant organization, and considering who was behind the protests and the fact that they fabricated some of the material they were protesting, suggests that it was motivated by a political agenda to suppress free speech, not by outrage over the cartoons themselves. As I shall argue further, this organized campaign became an effective tool of persuasion. Fear of Muslim retaliation over the printing of anything remotely offensive to Islam has managed to, and continues to, suppress the free-flow of ideas.

Gayle Rubin argues that “a common tactic of demagogues is to use inflammatory images to drive people into fear and hate beyond the reach of rational discussion” (20). Although she was discussing the campaign to suppress pornography, the quote is quite relevant – and true – to the situation of the Danish cartoon scandal. Those behind the campaign to end any criticism of Islam have managed to rile up enough angry Muslims and inspire enough violence that there was no escaping the message that penetrated and consumed the media – those who offend Islam will pay. But even more shocking than the fear they managed to stir up, as Lapham writes, was:

the mush-mouthed response on the part of the intimidated champions of liberty in London, Toronto, New York, and Washington. Here was a coordinated attack on the freedoms of thought and expression fundamental to the existence of a liberal society and the workings of a democratic government, and where were the public voices willing to say so? On sabbatical or leave of absence, mumbling apologies, sending their regrets. (9)

Fear overcame free speech and the fundamentalist Islamic mob succeeded in silencing the media. Almost none of the Western Media dared to reprint the cartoons, or to comment

on the fact that an attack on free speech was taking place. And they would not admit that the reason for not printing the images was out of fear of retaliation. Spiegelman made note of that fact when he wrote, “most news outlets in the United States declined to show the cartoons, professing a high-minded nod toward political correctness that smelled of hypocrisy and fear” (46). News outlets, like the New York Times, claimed they were not publishing the cartoons out of respect for religious icons, but as Spiegelman points out, the very day after the New York Times made that claim, they published Chris Ofili’s *Holy Virgin Mary*, a painting that has enraged much of the Catholic community (47). If the Media truly does not want to assault religious symbols, they should take equal care to be inoffensive to all religions. The fact is, the real reason they did not publish the Danish cartoons, but do not mind publishing images that are offensive to other religions, is because fundamentalist Islam has demonstrated what will happen if it is offended. Terror is a very persuasive medium.

The Danish cartoon scandal was not about cartoons at all. It was about the freedom of speech. The riots were an organized campaign designed to silence any criticism of fundamentalist Islam and it managed to strike fear in the hearts of the Western media. Fear prevailed over the freedom of speech during that violent time. But the battle is far from over. If the Media realizes that submitting to fear will only encourage more violence the next time someone speaks out, and if they approach sensitive issues with more courage the next time, free speech will reign once again.

#### Works Cited

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