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IN THE NEWS

Not just a battle of taboos

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There is more to the cartoon controversy than abstract notions such as "freedom of speech" or "blasphemy".



Plea for peace: A torchlight procession in Copenhagen appealing for a peaceful dialogue to resolve the row. Photo: REUTERS

IS it simply a battle of taboos — the Islamic taboo against depicting or ridiculing Prophet Mohammad and the Scandinavian taboo against curtailing freedom of speech? This might be the case for some of the more angry protestors on both sides, but the entire matter is much more complex.

It all started in late 2005 when *Jyllands-Posten*, a provincial and culturally conservative Danish paper, commissioned and published a series of cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammad. The cartoons provoked Muslims for various reasons. Religious Muslims were provoked because they saw it as an attempt to ridicule the prophet; many moderate Muslims were hurt because they saw the cartoons as expressing contempt for Muslims and making generalising statements about them.

As far as the cartoons were concerned as art, they were of middling quality and Orientalising trend, of the sort critiqued by Edward Said decades ago: for example, the turbans appeared more Pakistani or Indian than Arabic! They led to local (peaceful) protests, and a group of diplomats from Muslim countries demanded a meeting with the Danish Prime Minister. This was abruptly turned down on the grounds that the diplomats had demanded action against *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish system is committed to freedom of expression.

Weak excuse

This excuse was considered rather weak even by many moderate Danish Muslims who are committed to democracy and might believe that governments should not curb the media. I personally thought that the Danish Prime Minister's reaction was motivated by the fact that his coalition government is supported by the largely xenophobic Danish People's Party and that he himself came to power on a "no nonsense from migrants" platform.

Whatever the reasons, by not entering into any real dialogue, the Danish government sent the matter out into the streets — which is exactly where some extremists on both sides might have wanted it. The real reaction took some time in coming. But by late January 2006, Danish goods were being boycotted in some Muslim countries. In early February, some of the anti-cartoon demonstrations turned violent. Scandinavian embassies were attacked and set on fire; Danish flags burned. It has to be noted here that most demonstrations in Muslim countries were not violent and only one of the many demonstrations by Muslims in Europe turned (partly) violent.

All violence was seen as militant and excessive by many Danes. Some Copenhagen Imams were accused of having blown the matter out of proportion and there was talk in the Danish media that one of them ought to be expelled. It appears now that the Imams had circulated not only pictures of the offensive cartoons in various Muslim countries in a bid to move public opinion, but that they had included two or three diagrams or photos that did not depict the prophet or ridicule Islam in any way. The Imams claim that this was done from ignorance, because these illustrations had been sent as part of hate mails addressed to Danish Muslims who were protesting against the cartoons.

Ignorance and an inability to examine one's real motives seem to have played a big role in this controversy within Denmark. For instance, while people associated with *Jyllands-Posten* said that the paper had carried the cartoons for the sake of freedom of expression and would not have hesitated to carry cartoons of Jesus either, a Danish cartoonist came forth and claimed that, a couple of years ago, the paper had rejected some cartoons he had made of Jesus. An editor of *Jyllands-Posten* was quoted as saying that they had rejected the Jesus cartoons because the paper had not commissioned them and because they were not funny and would have offended the readers. Danish Muslims had no wish to see Jesus caricatured, but they felt that the editor had confirmed their suspicions: it is always easy to laugh at other people and, for political and cultural reasons, the paper did not care about its Danish Muslim readers.

The debate soon became polarised in Europe-U.S. and the Muslim countries. In Muslim countries, the matter was compounded by the fact that Denmark has been a staunch supporter — though only at the governmental level — of U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Internal politics in places like Syria, Lebanon and the West Bank are also said to have played a role. Mob action in Muslim countries led to the death of some Muslim protestors. Extreme slogans about "beheading" the cartoonists were captured and used by some Western media to obscure the genuine feelings of hurt among Muslims who were generally protesting peacefully. Some small European journals reprinted the cartoons to show solidarity.

Moderate Muslims in Denmark continue to be pressed to take one side or the other, though for many of them the matter is not about abstract notions like "freedom of speech" or "blasphemy" but simply about the sort of human decency that we display when we do not ridicule a child in the presence of her parent, or her parent in the presence of the child. The cartoons lacked that decency.

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