

## **Is There a Jihad Against Freedom of Expression?**

Where do you draw the line between freedom of expression and respect for religion? How do you protect a religion from attacks by nonbelievers? To begin to answer these questions, I would take a 12-hour flight, departing from Sea-Tac Airport, connecting in Reykjavik, and arriving at Copenhagen Airport in Denmark, to get to the bottom of the Muhammad cartoon controversy. Kurt Westergaard, the Danish cartoonist who drew Muhammad with a turban shaped as a bomb, has been a target of Muslim militants since late 2005. The Qur'an prohibits depictions of Allah and Muhammad, and in the eyes of the Islamists, Westergaard spat on the Qur'an, the holy words of Allah. Where do you draw the line between freedom of expression and respect for religion in Denmark, a country with a Western-style democracy and an increasing Muslim population?

On September 30, 2005, Flemming Rose, the culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, a right of center Danish newspaper, approved and published 12 cartoons of the Final Prophet, Muhammad (Timeline). Carsten Juste, *Jyllands-Posten*'s editor, said the cartoons were a test to see whether the freedom of expression in Denmark has been limited by the threat of Islamic terrorism (Belien). The most striking and offensive of the cartoons was designed and drawn by Kurt Westergaard. He illustrated Muhammad with a black turban shaped as a bomb. In Islam, it is forbidden to depict Allah or Muhammad. In Surah 21, ayas 52-54 in the Quran, it is stated that physically representing Allah or Muhammad leads to idolatry, which is strictly prohibited. The 12 cartoons, especially Westergaard's, disregard critical fundamentals of Islam; this is the basis of the controversy.

In the months following the publication of the cartoons, protestors rioted outside the offices of *Jyllands-Posten*, Palestinians burned Danish flags, and Libya announced the closure of its embassy in Denmark. On January 29, 2006, *Jyllands-Posten* printed a statement in Arabic explaining that the drawings were published in accordance with freedom of expression and were not a campaign against Islam. In response to the continued hostility, the editor of *Jyllands-Posten*,

Carsten Juste, wrote an editorial apologizing for offending Muslims (Gudmundsson). In his editorial, he wrote, “In our opinion, the 12 cartoons were moderate and not intended to be insulting. They did not go against Danish laws, but have evidently offended many Muslims, for which we apologize” (Gudmundsson). Juste’s apology did not assuage the Muslim population. During the early weeks in February 2006, Muslims rioted outside the Danish Embassy in London, mobs in Damascus attacked the Norwegian, Danish, Swedish and French Embassies, and demonstrators set fire to the Danish Embassy in Beirut (Timeline).

The cartoon controversy has made the clash between Western-style democracy and Islam more prominent. Freedom of expression and Quranic law appear to be at odds. Rose, the culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten* stated, “I did not ask the illustrators to make the Prophet a laughing stock... We were not treating Islam or the Prophet any differently from how we treat everybody else in Denmark” (Viewpoints). On the other hand, is it fair to defend the principle of freedom when cultures or religions are attacked, or if communities are broken apart? Dr. Yunes Teinaz, the spokesman for the London Mosque and Islamic Cultural Center stated, “We do value the freedom of expression in Europe, but it shouldn’t be abused to provoke hatred and division between communities. Freedom of expression is not a license to attack a culture or religion” (Viewpoints).

In February of 2008, the Danish police arrested two Tunisians and a Dane of Moroccan descent on charges of plotting to kill Westergaard. The cartoonist said, “This will go on for the rest of my lifetime, I am sure. I will never get out of this. But I feel more anger than fear. I’m angry because my life is threatened, and I know I have done nothing wrong, just done my job” (Kimmelman). And the 74-year-old cartoonist was right about the violence. On the very first weekend of January 2010, a Muslim immigrant, 28-year-old Muhudiin Mohamed Geele, launched an attack on Westergaard (Lyll). Geele approached the Westergaard home with a knife and an ax. The cartoonist fled into a locked safe room built into his house and hit a panic button to summon the

police. Geele, a Somali Muslim, has ties to Al-Shabab, a Somali terror organization that enforces strict Sharia law and has a relationship with Al Qaeda (Who). The Al-Shabab spokesman Sheikh Ali Muhamud Rage told the AFP news agency: “We appreciate the incident in which a Muslim Somali boy attacked the devil who abused our prophet Mohammed and we call upon all Muslims around the world to target the people like him” (Charges). Geele pled not guilty but was charged with attempted manslaughter.

The violence continues to this day. At least 200 have died in protests against the cartoons (Cohen). In addition, Islamist militants placed a one million dollar price on Westergaard’s head (Charges). Flemming Rose removed his name from the local telephone directory for security, and Westergaard moved into his fifth safe house (Kimmelman).

The Muhammad cartoon controversy illustrates a clash between freedom of expression and respect for religion. Four years have transpired since *Jyllands-Posten*’s publication of the cartoons, and Muslim militants are still on the attack. The friction between freedom of expression and respect for religion continues. Westergaard’s drawing depicted Muhammad with a turban shaped as a bomb. Many Westerners believe that by blowing up embassies and calling for executions, the radical Muslim militants are proving the cartoon’s legitimacy. But, radical Muslims fervently believe that the cartoon defames their religion. If I could cover any issue in the world, I would hop on that plane to Copenhagen Airport, with my pencil and notepad at the ready. I would talk to leaders of both sides of the controversy to see if I could, in any way, contribute to clarifying the issues surrounding freedom of expression and respect for religion.

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