

Tim JENSEN*

The Muhammad Cartoon Crisis

The Tip of An Iceberg

On March 15, 2006, the Director of Public Prosecutions in Denmark announced his decision not to institute criminal proceedings against *Jyllands-Posten* for its article “The Face of Muhammad,” published on September 30, 2005.¹ Neither the cartoons nor the text accompanying them, he argued, violate the sections 140 and 266b of the Criminal Code aimed at protecting religious feelings against mockery and scorn, and groups against scorn and degradation on account of their religion. “The face of Muhammad,” legally speaking, was neither blasphemous nor discriminatory.

One of his arguments was that *Jyllands-Posten* did not intend to provoke for the sake of provocation, but to provoke a public debate on freedom of expression in regard to religion and religious feelings. Besides, the Director found reason to consider what is “generally considered accepted usage or other form of expression in Denmark,” and he noted that “a direct and informal form of debate is not unusual in Denmark.”

For reasons later to be mentioned, I have my doubts as to the wisdom of the decision and the validity of the arguments. But it is beyond doubt that “The Face of Muhammad” did raise a debate. In Denmark, and around the world. And, it did so partly because quite a few Muslims in Denmark and around the globe actually *did* feel provoked and offended, and did think that the “The Face of Muhammad” was part of a defamatory and discriminatory campaign directed exclusively against Islam and Muslims.

Quite a few non-Muslims think so too. And the UN also seems to think so. November 24, 2005, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance asked the Danish government to answer some questions in regard to the cartoons. Despite the substantial reply dated January 23, 2006, in a report of February 13, the UN Special Rapporteur found the cartoon issue one of the most severe examples of hatred for Islam, adding that the Danish government in its initial handling of the matter revealed “... the trivialization of Islamophobia at the political level”²

* Associate Professor, University of Southern Denmark, Religious Studies. General Secretary of The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR).

1. The English text of the decision is published at: <http://www.rigsadvokaten.dk/Default.aspx?id=176&recordid176=887>
2. See the Report E/CN.4/2006/17 at: http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=92

Severe criticism of the handling of the crisis by the Danish government, not least the Prime Minister, did not come only from some Muslims, the political opposition, and the UN. True, one of the opposition leaders, Marianne Jelved, attacked the Prime Minister, calling him “dangerous” and a risk to national security, due to the alliance with the neo-nationalist Danish People’s Party, his arrogant refusal to listen to criticism, and a dangerous black-and-white view as to who are friends and foes. An equally severe criticism came from leading business men, normally close friends of the right-wing government, as they linked the crisis to the failed integration, a failure partly due to the Islamophobic and discriminatory discourse and policy of the government and its parliamentary basis, the Danish People’s Party. But, naturally, the government and the Prime Minister also have supporters, and so does *Jyllands-Posten*, in Denmark and elsewhere. Examples are legion.³

In any case, the violent demonstrations, the burning of embassies and the boycott of Danish goods have come to an end. Feverish politicians, diplomats, pundits and journalists in Denmark and around the world, are slowly recovering from the ‘nightmarish’ weeks of late January and early February when the crisis ran amuck. Though ‘nightmarish’ the cartoon crisis was not a nightmare. It was real. Probably the most serious political crisis in Danish history since World War II.

It will not change the world, discourses and *Realpolitik*, as did 9/11. But it has already made history, and it is beyond doubt that it was but the tip of the iceberg, a symptom of severe problems and conflicts, in Denmark, Europe, the Muslim world, and in international relations.

The debate continues. And it is greatly to be hoped that the crisis becomes a lesson for the future, or even better, a turning point. Processes of integration in Denmark and other EU countries, as well as international cooperation and coexistence, depend on balanced analyses and strategies, creative thinking and a will to act accordingly.

The urge for this has been stressed also in recent statements by Usama bin-Laden, al-Zawahri and Mohammad Hassan. For instance, bin-Laden condemned the cartoons as one more sign of what he considers the Western crusade against Islam, calling for an extended boycott of European and US goods as well as for a continued war against the crusaders. Hassan, in more direct terms, encouraged terrorist attacks on Denmark, Norway and France. No doubt, these were strategic moves to profit from the widespread opposition to the Muhammad cartoons even among moderate Muslims, normally not sharing these extremist points of view. These moves, however, were facilitated by the publication of the “Face of Muhammad,” and extremist points of view were fuelled by it as well.

Offending many more than militant extremists, and buying into the anti-Muslim discourse and that of a clash of civilizations, this helped make the extremist rhetoric on Western hostility and ‘Crusade’ against Islam and Muslims more plausible. Almost at the same time as the audiotape by bin-Laden appeared on al-Jazeera April 23, 2006, the Danish Ministry of Foreign affairs released a report concluding that

3. The following unofficial weblog may illustrate this: <http://bibelen.blogspot.com/>

the Middle East will be a problem for many years, because of the widespread opposition to what is perceived as Western cultural imperialism and colonialism.

Bin Laden (and Bush) may be exceptional in terms of explicit dualistic rhetoric, and Huntington's "Clash of Civilization" may be theoretically flawed: thinking and acting in terms of an existing or possible clash of civilizations is no longer limited to a minority of Muslim and anti-Muslim extremists. Events, rhetoric, and various agents are doing their best to make the thesis a fact, using the rhetoric to legitimize various violent or non-violent agendas.

One of the main challenges, of course, is to counter the rhetoric of a clash of civilizations, and to disarm the proponents of good arguments in favor of it. This, however, is anything but easy. The discourse is powerful and pervasive. During a recent meeting on April 3, 2006, with his Spanish colleague, Miguel Angel Moratinos, the Danish Minister of Foreign affairs mentioned the risk of Huntington's clash-of-civilizations scenario becoming a reality, stressing his hope that concerted efforts, such as the Barcelona-process, and the 'Partnership for Progress and Reform' would help prevent it, transforming a clash of civilizations into an 'Alliance of Civilizations.'⁴

It is, of course, good to know that the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is aware that there is more to the cartoon crisis than some Danish imams traveling to the Middle East to raise support for their protest. Still, it is problematic if it buys into the very pretext for the publication of the cartoons, a pretext buying into the Muslim and anti-Muslim extremist discourses on a Western crusade and a clash of civilizations.

As argued by Riordan,⁵ the "Alliance of Civilizations," as presented in the statement mentioned above and elsewhere, may very well be bound to fail, based as it is upon the very constructs it sets out to deconstruct, and because the partners of the alliance are the good guys, i.e. those among the 'others' who are already our friends as well as foes of the 'real' foes. A criticism is to be directed probably also towards the Danish 'Arabic Initiative' and most of the many dialogue-meetings arranged in Denmark and elsewhere.

In what follows I do not present a series of strategic plans to help solve all the problems related to the cartoon crisis as it took fire in Denmark and elsewhere. I simply want to shed a little more light on aspects of the specific Danish context as well as on the handling of the crisis. Before doing so, however, I find it necessary to mention a few fundamental issues and say a few words about the international contexts. Along the way, I shall mention some lessons that I think have to be learnt.

* * *

One of the first lessons is that the crisis was (and is) multifaceted. Causes, conditions and contexts are many, and it is a serious mistake to look for only one

4. <http://www.drawings.um.dk/en/menu/News/AllianceOfCivilizationsAndTheEUsRelationshipWithMuslimCountries.htm>

5. Cf. Riordan, S.: "Alliance of Civilizations or 'Alliance of the civilized'?" Real Institutu Elcano, 3.4.2006

reason or to think that it is an easy task to tell the ‘bad guys’ from the ‘good guys.’ It is not a question of ‘either-or’ but ‘both-and,’ whether you talk of respect for religion and freedom of expression or other aspects of the crisis. This lesson follows from sound reasoning and the factual complexity of the world, and it follows implicitly from everything mentioned below. I shall add more explicit comments as I proceed.

Denmark, for reasons given below, was an ideal place for the crisis to start. Still, it must be understood also in an international context, including globalization in – and through – the local and international media. It began in a local Danish daily and context but escalated and spread thanks to the globalization, lack of centralized control over the media and the fact that there are many places with the right conditions for a crisis like this burst into flames. And there are many who are more than willing to fan the flames.

Powerful, critical and all-pervading media, the free press, is a prerequisite for democracy. But it is also a problem because the media are not just critical and rational. The cartoon crisis started in *Jyllands-Posten*, as I see it, as a complex mixture of typical Muslim-bashing, a desire to provoke Muslims *and* a public debate, as a result of a loose idea, and as a media stunt meant to entertain and to make profit.

To separate one motive from the other is difficult, if possible at all. It is, moreover, counterproductive in terms of understanding. The mixture of motives is precisely what characterize the media in general, and in regard to the cartoon crisis as well. No matter how sincere other European dailies publishing the cartoons may have been when making reference to freedom of expression as a motive, they too had mixed motives. Furthermore, as events spiraled, the general sensationalist and confrontational focus of the media on crisis, war, and conflict were among the main causes of the crisis and its escalation.

Consequently, journalists and editors around the globe have to seriously reconsider their responsibilities in a crisis like this and in regard to the problems highlighted by the crisis. They have to discuss how to balance their various motives and tasks: news as entertainment and news as critical analysis, the defense of freedom of expression vis á vis responsibility for civilized conversation, national and international security. Censorship may not be good, but some kind of self-censorship is a prerequisite for civilized cooperation and coexistence.

To discuss and find this delicate balance is one of the challenges highlighted by the cartoon crisis, a challenge confronting, of course, not only the media but all of us. *Jyllands-Posten* most certainly succeeded in putting freedom of expression at the top of the agenda. It did, however, also provoke equally heated debates on the need for self-censorship, restraint and civilized behavior in the global village and in the press.

Another major precondition for the cartoon crisis is the current existence of militant conflicts and wars, and the resulting mistrust and frustration. As argued by a Danish scholar, the cartoon crisis must be understood also in the context of a ‘logic of war.’ The wars on terrorism in discourse and practice, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced more terrorists and more resentment against the allied nations (including Denmark) and against the West ‘as such.’

Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, double standards in regard to human rights, the continuing conflict in Palestine, poverty, despotic regimes supported by Western

governments and the massive inflow of Western values into the Muslim world, are all contributing factors. The list is long and it comes after centuries of colonialism and Western dominance. No wonder quite a few people in the Middle East buy into conspiracy theories and ideas of the West trying to conquer them, to arrogantly implant democracy and Western standards, – and to control their oil. All these issues – including the problems with integrating Muslim minorities in most EU countries, the discussions about the integration of Turkey, and the long-standing Western tradition of using Islam as the significant ‘other’ – have played a major role as the crisis flared up and spread.

Likewise, of course, quite a few people had their images of the enemy – referred to simply as Islam and Muslims (or, in a slightly more nuanced way, as Islamists) – confirmed by the reactions of some Muslims, especially of course the violent demonstrations on display in the media. But also the vehement verbal opposition to freedom of expression uttered by many Muslim spokesmen confirmed for many the notion of a real conflict in terms of values. And this conflict, as I see it, cannot be denied. It is real, and we have to realize this and do our best to find out how we can all live in peace while having these differences of opinion. There is no alternative to a pragmatic solution. The ‘other’ is a part of ‘us.’

Coming back to the de- and re-contextualization of the cartoons as they were globalized by the media and various other agents, it does not take long to realize that the cartoons proved useful to many agents: The Egyptian government, in the midst of an election and in sore need to prove itself a true friend of Islam, could use it and most certainly has been very active in mobilizing more opposition to the cartoons. The Syrian and Saudi governments, with a similar need for popularity and control over Islamist groups ready to profit on the cartoon business at the cost of the governments, had their agendas, while organizations like the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries) and the Arab League could use the issue to demonstrate their *raison d’être* and their energy.

Consequently, no matter to which degree many Muslims were truly offended by the cartoons, it is no easy matter to tell where religious feelings spill over into all these other issues. And all of the issues have to be considered if we want to use the cartoon crisis in a constructive way.

Religion and religious feelings, contrary to what many people think – religious or not – do not live lives of their own in splendid isolation from everything else. Religious feelings cannot be easily distinguished from feelings in general, and religion with its ethics, its social functions and its functioning in regard to the construction of identities, cannot easily be isolated from politics.

It is not easy to tell where sincere devotion to, and defense of, freedom of expression end, and where cynical political considerations take over. The Danish Prime Minister was not just stubborn or even arrogant. He is, no doubt, also a man of principles in regard to freedom of expression and the press. But he is also a skilled politician, from the very beginning well aware that any kind of compromise might cost him the support from the Danish People’s Party and of a substantial number of voters. Polls during the crisis speak very clearly: the crisis added support to the Danish People’s Party and its hard-line policy in regard to immigration, Muslims and Islam.

This brings me to some of the reasons why Denmark can be seen as a perfect place for the crisis to occur. The first reason is the many years of pervasive political and populist anti-Muslim discourse, and of an intense conflict between those who support it, and those who do not. The connection of this discourse with a harsh immigration policy is also clear; a policy that has frequently been criticized by human rights advocates for being out of line with international efforts to fight discrimination and racism, and, in some instances, for being directly discriminatory – even bordering on racism.

The third issue, linked to this, is the government's actual handling of the crisis, including its unwillingness to admit mistakes and to listen to criticism, even from international human rights organizations. The government has declined to create a special commission to take a closer look at the whole affair, and it has been extremely slow in sharing information with the special parliamentary committee dealing with matters of security and foreign policy. Besides, it has in several cases denied public access to the documents that might be relevant in order to analyze the development of the crisis and the government's handling. This seems strange to many observers, not least because the government has been so principled in its supporting freedom of expression and the press.

Here I want to focus on the anti-Muslim climate and discourse: In my opinion, to understand the publication of the cartoons it is this that one has to deal with first, rather than with a threat to democracy and freedom of expression by way of marked tendency to self-censorship out of fear from Muslim reprisals. Denmark, as regards xenophobia and Islamophobia,⁶ is special case in Europe due to the government's close connection with, and dependence on, the Danish People's Party, which strategically uses neo-nationalist and cultural-exclusivist discourses on 'Danishness' and the clash of civilizations, and thrives on xenophobia (or the Islamophobe version of it).

The Danish People's Party managed to influence public discourse and *Realpolitik* ever since one of its forerunners, Mogens Glistrup, declared in the 1980s that immigrant Muslims were the greatest danger to Danish welfare and culture. Although Glistrup was convicted several times for racist hate-mongering, others, including leading politicians, quite often have managed to get away with. The police argues that politicians should have an especially wide-ranging freedom of expression. Glistrup himself got away, for instance, with saying that Muslim immigrants were procreating like rats.

Examples of hate-mongering by politicians are legion. Louise Frevert, a leading member of the Danish People's Party, running for mayor of Copenhagen at the time of the cartoon crisis, called Muslims a "cancer" for Denmark at her website and in another publication. The police dismissed charges filed against her, excusing her not to be responsible for the text on her website. Two other MPs, both formerly

6. Report after report seems to document the overall tendency in all Europe. Cf. e.g. websites of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), and the report by the UN Special Rapporteur mentioned above.

ministers in the established state-supported Lutheran-Protestant Church, are famous for their outspoken dislike for Islam, both of them claiming that Islam and Muslim immigrants ought to be the central issue in Danish politics.

The leader of the Danish People's Party, Pia Kjaersgaard, is of the same opinion. To give one example before the cartoons were published. Her weekly newsletter on June 13, 2005, stated that areas in Copenhagen and other cities have become "populated by people on a lower stage of civilization. Bringing with them primitive and barbaric customs, killing in the name of honor, enforcing marriages, halal-slaughtering, and in favor of blood revenge." At other occasions, she and others simply stated that "the Muslim way of life is incompatible with the Danish Christian way of thinking." In Denmark, the idea that Islam and Muslim immigrants constitute a fifth-column as part of an Islamist master plan to take over the world and the Kingdom of Denmark goes back long before 9/11.

To illustrate to which degree this discourse has become normal and has been taken over by government ministers – giving the UN Special Rapporteur good reasons to worry –, two examples may be mentioned. At the annual meeting of the Conservative People's Party, the Minister of Cultural affairs declared that:

(A) medieval Muslim culture (will never be) as valid here in Denmark as Danish culture... There are still many battles to win. The most important ones have to do with the confrontation we witness when seeing how immigrants from Muslim countries refuse to respect Danish culture and European norms. In the midst of our country, parallel societies are developing, with minorities practicing their medieval norms and undemocratic ways of thinking. We cannot and must not accept this. (Author's translation)

The cultural war, declared by the government as it came to power, is directly aimed at Muslim immigrants. The speech was delivered on 23 September, 2005, less than a week before the publication of the cartoons.

However, the speech was neither criticized nor modified by the Prime Minister. Actually, he himself, just a year before, in his opening speech to the parliament on October 5, 2004, said that:

Certain spiritual leaders, imams and muftis ... vehemently oppose integration with their utterances in favor of suppression of women, their legal-religious demands on the young generation and their obdurate preaching. I know that most Muslims in this country do not share the medieval view of life of these imams and muftis, but I am worried because these fanatic religious leaders are contributing to the creation of divides and confrontation in Denmark. (Author's translation)

Returning to the blame put on certain 'imams,' the statement indicates – in spite of the fact that the Prime Minister is wise enough to talk about 'certain' imams and not to put all Muslim in the same bag – that generalizations and prejudice thrive on the top government level. Except for a very few documented and specific cases relating to a very limited number of imams, there simply is no research to document the accusations made by the Prime Minister, and furthermore, all research indicates that the imams' influence on the 200.000 'statistical' Muslims in Denmark is marginal.

No more than around 10%-15 % Muslims attend Friday prayers in the mosques and the vast majority seem to be more interested in getting a job, having fun and taking care of their families than in the sayings of the few imams who have made it to the front page of newspapers.

Moving to *Jyllands-Posten*, I must say that I do not share the widespread view that *Jyllands-Posten* – prior to the publication of the cartoons – can be said to represent *only* a pro-government and anti-Muslim attitude. It most certainly never represented a secularist attitude, at least not in regard to the majority and state religion. *Jyllands-Posten* has produced fair reports on Muslim practices and beliefs, sometimes showing great sensibility to religious feelings.

Nevertheless, *Jyllands-Posten* has contributed to the typical anti-Muslim discourse. To give one example. During a harsh debate in 2001 as some young Danes with immigrant background entered politics, *Jyllands-Posten* clearly subscribed to unsubstantiated Islamophobic allegations, accusing these young politicians of being Islamists in democratic clothing and fifth-columnist of a militant Islamism. At the time, the cartoonist responsible for the cartoon showing Muhammad with a bomb and the Islamic creed in his turban, drew a cartoon showing one of the young Muslim politicians entering Denmark through a gate of Danish flags. The young man is depicted as if he were hiding his true identity while his clothes clearly indicate his militant past – and hidden motivations. The cartoon was meant to illustrate an article written by Bertel Haarder, at that time a member of the European Parliament and later the Minister of Refugee, Immigrant and Integration affairs who implemented the severe immigration policy adopted by the present government and the Danish People's Party. Haarder, also famous for mocking Muslim immigrant women and men settling in Sweden because of the Danish requirements for family reunification and marriages involving 'foreigners,' is now the Minister of Education as well as of church affairs.

The cartoon depicting Muhammad with a bomb in the turban, then, might not only indicate that all Muslims are (potential) terrorists, but also that Islam (cf. the creed written on the turban) is a religion of terror, or that Muhammad is used to legitimize terror. Most likely, in line with the public discourse, including articles and editorials in *Jyllands-Posten*, it indicates the opinion that immigrant Muslims and Islam in general are time-bombs and a threat to Danish culture.

Jyllands-Posten launched the publication of the cartoons almost as an act of civil disobedience or freedom fighting: an act of resistance to the (postulated) tendency, among other dailies and intellectuals, to self-censorship and suppression of freedom of expression due to a threat from Islam, which is well on its way to winning the local and global culture wars that are become true clashes of civilizations. However, as indicated above, the "Face of Muhammad" can also be seen as nothing but a further example of Islam-bashing, another element in a discourse legitimizing discrimination and the harsh policy of the government. This is yet another example of how a reference to 'freedom of expression' and 'democratic values' can be an excuse for saying whatever you want about the 'significant other' and about what is considered a problem minority.

Consequently, when the Public Prosecutor, in his decision not to institute criminal proceedings, argued that a “direct and informal form of debate is not unusual in Denmark, where even offensive and insulting expressions of opinion are widely accepted,” he is no doubt right. Unfortunately, as indicated by the examples of hate-mongering mentioned above (and the restraint exercised by *Jyllands-Posten* in publishing what might be considered blasphemous drawings of Jews and Christians), there seem to be groups in Denmark more likely to be the target of offensive and insulting expressions and opinions than others. As I mentioned in an interview with *Jyllands-Posten* on the very day the cartoons were printed, not knowing that it was cartoons and not simply innocent drawings, one may well ask *Jyllands-Posten* and others who defend of freedom of expression and the right to mock and scorn religious feelings and people, why this defense was not launched a year before when a small group of Christians managed to make a supermarket stop selling sandals with pictures of Jesus.

Considering the reactions to the cartoons by some Muslims, as well as the letter sent by eleven ambassadors from Muslim countries to the Prime Minister on October 12, 2005, it is evident that the cartoons were merely the last drop which made the cup overflow. They are reacting against what they consider an anti-Muslim smear campaign, and they are asking the Prime Minister to help put an end to it. They refer explicitly to examples of racist anti-Muslim statements. In his answer to the ambassadors, the Prime Minister actually seemed to realize this, mentioning the government’s initiatives to foster dialogue.

Yet (and this was one of the most serious mistakes made by the Prime Minister), he declined to meet the ambassadors and insisted on the principle of freedom of expression, stressing time and again that, also as Minister for the Press, he could and would not interfere with the practice of freedom of the press. In terms of intercultural communication and diplomacy, it was of course not clever to refuse to meet them. Probably, the entire crisis might have been avoided by a diplomatic and civilized gesture. He could have said what he said in his written reply, but he could have done so face to face, demonstrating and expressing his understanding for their concern and distancing himself and the government from any anti-Muslim and racist discourse. He actually did so later in autumn 2005 in response to statements by a member of the Danish People’s Party in the parliament, and he did so in his New Year’s address to the nation.

Furthermore, the government and the Prime Minister kept insisting that the ambassadors actually wanted him to use the relevant laws to interfere with *Jyllands-Posten*, and that this demand forced him to refuse. However, it has been proven that the Prime Minister did not only respond to a *draft* letter from the ambassadors, but that he also misread its wording. The sentence “We deplore these statements and publications and urge Your Excellency’s government to take all those responsible to task *under the law of the land ...*” does *not* mean that he should take the law in his own hands or break the law, but that he should act within the existing law.

Besides, the tone in several statements of the Prime Minister on this issue clearly justified the anger expressed by both, the Egyptian ambassador and the Minister of

Foreign affairs, who claimed that the Danish Prime Minister's attitude had been arrogant, demeaning and condescending, clearly revealing his notion that these 'foreigners' are incapable of understanding the rules of democracy.

There are also a few considerations to be made regarding the (in)famous imams who traveled around the Middle East in November and December to raise support in their efforts to make the government react against the cartoons and what they considered a defamatory campaign in Denmark against Islam and Muslims in general.

It is true that the imams took with them other caricatures, in addition to those published in *Jyllands-Posten*, but this might have been due to their wish to demonstrate that the cartoons were but the last drop making the cup overflow. Furthermore, the imams might have induced the subsequent reactions from the OIC, the Arab League and others. They might even have used words and translations of texts that were not completely true to the facts in Denmark, while their behavior most likely made it possible for various agents to use the cartoon crisis for their own purposes. The imams most certainly were one out of the many factors that lead, much later on, to the boycott and the demonstrations.

However, to try to explain the escalation of the crisis merely by reference to the imams is not only to oversimplify matters. It is a problematic and dangerous way of detracting critical attention from the other reasons, including those for which the government might be held partly responsible. It borders on the singling out of scapegoats, and tends to become another example of using 'Islam' and the imams to conceal severe problems of a different nature.

Besides, as I see it, one has to take the imam's claims seriously, namely that they acted as they did out of fear that the cartoon crisis might prompt frustrated and marginalized young Muslims in Denmark to engage in violence and even terrorism. It should also be considered that the Director of Danish Intelligence has complimented the imams for their cooperation during the crisis, and that there have been no violent reactions among Danish Muslims so far. To call the imams traitors to be expelled from the country and to do the same with those who tried to nuance the debate on the imams is symptomatic of the discursive strategies of the Danish People's Party. It is, however, not in accordance with the stress laid on freedom of expression.

* * *

What lessons has the government learnt? The Prime Minister had learnt some lessons even before the cartoon crisis exploded in late January. Criticism of the tone of the public debate, of the government's immigration policies and the treatment of refugees, and the Prime Minister's refusal to meet the Muslim ambassadors, was raised in autumn by intellectuals, pastors of the established church and a group of former ambassadors. During autumn 2005, and most conspicuously in his address to the nation at New Year, the Prime Minister distanced himself from any unfair demonizing of Muslims. But he did not, as noted above, distance himself from the declaration of war against backward Muslims made by his Minister of Cultural affairs, and it took a boycott and the burning of Danish embassies to make him

publicly declare in al-Arabiyya that he and the Danes in general had great respect for Islam and the religious feelings of Muslims.

Another lesson learnt by the Prime Minister is that religion, as he sees it, has come to play an important role in the public sphere. But the Prime Minister has not yet made it clear how he wants to ensure that religion remains in the private sphere. Besides the fact that Denmark is, constitutionally speaking, not a secular nation since it is bound by the constitution to the national Lutheran Church, the Minister of Education (and church affairs) has announced that he does not want state schools to be secular – much to the surprise of all those who thought they already were. On the contrary, he wants to use religious education to make pupils more familiar with the Christian religion and heritage.

With the neo-nationalist Danish People's Party cherishing 'Danishness' based on Christian history and heritage and led by two church pastors, one may well wonder how he imagines that religion can be removed from Danish politics and from the public sphere. One cannot help but suspect that he is not thinking of *all* religions or all aspects of religion. As for his expressed respect for religious feelings, it should also be noted that Jens Rhode, the Venstre parliamentary group's spokesman answered in response to the UN Special Rapporteur's criticism that he could not care less. Besides, as Rhode put it, "A man from Senegal, sitting in a center on racial discrimination, is not the one to exercise mind control."

As for the Danish People's Party, it seems that it too has learnt a lesson. In late January, its leader, Pia Kjærsgaard, ordered the members of the party to try to differentiate between Muslims and Islamists. So far, however, her order has not exactly been followed by everyone, and she herself has been quick to condemn the imams for using their right to freedom of expression. Likewise, her reaction to an announcement made by the Grand Mufti of Egypt is revealing: Kjærsgaard said if he [the mufti] did not have so much influence "in a backward and ignorant part of the world" as he actually does, then she would not care about what he says or not.

As regards the Ministry of Foreign affairs, at the time of the crisis and today, one has to admit that it tries its best at its official website – also in response to various critics, such as the UN Special Rapporteur – to highlight passages of past and present speeches of various ministers as proof of a tolerant, inclusive and respectful attitude and policies towards Muslims in general and towards immigrants in Denmark. The problem, of course, is that as indicated above the selection is highly selective.

As shown by an analysis of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) related to the cartoon crisis,⁷ some of the answers do not tell the whole story. It can even be said that they consist of the same mixture of 'half-truth and half-lie' that the imams have been accused of. One of many examples is the statement that the Queen of Denmark has made no critical comments on Islam. Certainly, the reference to her New Year's address is correct, but in a book on interviews with the Queen published

7. <http://www.drawings.um.dk/en/menu/QuestionsAndAnswers/> As for the criticism of the FAQ at the website, cf. Rune Engelbreht in *Politiken* 17.03.06.

in 2005, she speaks about Islam in a way that could be considered in line with the dominant public discourse on Islam as enemy.

As for more direct action, the government has launched and re-launched several high-profile projects in line with initiatives such as the “Alliance of Civilizations”: the ‘Arabic Initiative,’ launched in 2003, is being re-launched because of the damage caused by the cartoon crisis; a special envoy to the Middle East has been appointed; dialogue forums have been established and financed; and the Ministry has even taken the trouble to announce that (finally) there now seems to be – with the government’s help, of course – a solution to the problem of finding a location for Denmark’s first Muslim cemetery.

However, as leading figures in Danish business have said time and again, Denmark’s image has been seriously damaged by the crisis. A leading British ‘branding’ consultant and specialist, Simon Anholt, agreed. It will take more than cosmetic facelift and smart marketing to restore it. If the Prime Minister thinks (and he has expressed this view) that the cartoon crisis has made Denmark better known throughout the world and that this is a perfect opportunity to market Danish goods, then he is wrong. To try to market Denmark as the capital of freedom of expression will be even harder. If millions of Muslims think that Denmark is a hotbed of racism and xenophobia, then the Danes have to consider seriously to what a degree it might be true. And if this is not true, as the government continues to insist in response to criticism, then it has to be proven in practice.

As noted by the Documentation and Advisory Centre on Racial Discrimination (DACoRD), an independent Danish organization, in connection with a recent opinion poll (March 10) by the UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) blaming the Danish state for not taking the measures needed to combat racial discrimination, there has long been a marked tendency to downplay racial discrimination in the country. Most often, both the police and the public prosecutor, as in the cartoon’s case, choose not to raise charges for violations of section 266b of the Criminal Code, the article protecting groups against scorn and degradation on account of their religion.

At the time of writing this article, a new and critical report from the European Committee on Racial Discrimination is on its way. As so often before, the government took the opportunity to leak its response to the press, trying to kill criticism even before the report was publicly released. Unfortunately, this seems to be the government’s usual way of dealing with criticism. Another characteristic response is to simply deny the accusation by saying the government’s policy cannot be wrong since other European nations are aiming to copy Denmark’s immigration policies.

Of course, this is not a very convincing argument, and looking back at the cartoon crisis one can only warn the other EU member states not to adopt too many of Denmark’s policies and instead to be more open to criticism and try to find new ways to deal with Islam and Muslim immigrants. One advice is not to downplay racism and discrimination, but to do more to get rid of them. Another useful advice is to downplay the importance of religion and culture in regard to integration, and instead concentrate on social improvements, education and employment, and to

foster a critical but civilized public and political debate. Balanced criticism of certain aspects of Muslim practice and thought is both positive and advisable; but so is criticism of all religions and their practitioners, as well as of everything non-religious, including the policies to be implemented in regard to integration of foreigners and the Muslim world.