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Jyllands Posten Cartoons

By Hari Kunzru

[This is a post I was asked to submit to Pickled Politics. The discussion following it on PP contains interesting comments from Danes, Muslims, a self-confessed libertarian Tory and others. The PP site may be of general interest to Mute readers as it's an attempt to provide a 'progressive' forum for British Asian political debate.]

I've seen the Danish cartoons. I found several of them offensive, in a way that wasn't particularly surprising, given what I found out about Danish society when I visited Denmark as a novelist. On my press trip I inevitably, found myself answering a lot of journalistic questions about race, immigration and so on. Denmark is in many ways a parochial place. It hasn't got a long history of mass immigration and as it tries to come to terms with its new immigrant communities, it appears to be discovering a strong and previously latent streak of xenophobia. That xenophobia was unconsciously expressed to me by several journalists (one, I think, from Jyllands Posten) who worried that "Danish values" were being challenged - those values mainly being those of classical Western liberalism, including openness and free speech. I remember being in an interview with a female journalist when a young woman wearing a hijab walked past the window. She went into a surprisingly-vehement diatribe about how angry it made her to see veiled women, because as a feminist she felt it was evidence of subjugation and that an alien patriarchy was importing its prejudices into her country. While she was, on the surface, expressing an opinion common among many liberal feminists around the world, the kind of opinion one hears often in the UK, the *way* she spoke startled me, because it seemed to indicate a deep, visceral level of threat. I'm not a muslim and I'm no proponent of the veil (for some of the same reasons as its feminist critics) but I ended up arguing strongly against her, trying to explain that her image of the position of muslim women was little better than a caricature, a cartoon.

The Jyllands Posten cartoons, while purporting to be some kind of gesture supporting the notion of free speech, are shot through with the same kind of latent racism as I met on my Danish press trip. Not the kind of intense racism that leads to lynchings, but the soft kind, the kind that lots of middle-class people express to one another at dinner parties when they think nobody from an ethnic minority is there to hear. They're full of hook-nosed bearded figures and big-eyed veiled lovelies - stereotypes straight out of 30's Hollywood B-movies. I found them offensive, not because I believe that one shouldn't represent the Prophet Mohammed but because they're nasty and small-minded. They come from a position of ignorance rather than enlightenment.

That said, the question becomes one of finding an appropriate response. As a newspaper editor I wouldn't have reprinted them, because they're trashy and provide very poor ground on which to base an argument about free speech. I believe strongly in the principle and as a member of PEN, the writers organisation, I'm involved in fights to defend it, but these particular examples of the practice deserved to wither and die. Instead they've been elevated, which is unfortunate. My own feeling is that an appropriate response is exactly the one I'm making - to say the cartoons are nasty, sniggering and mildly racist and have done with it. However, I'm now confronted with protestors in London carrying placards calling for the "butchering" of those who insult the prophet. This goes beyond even what Al Muhajiroun's Omar Bakri Mohammed was asking for on Radio 4 this morning the rendition of the offending editor to a muslim country where he can be tried and executed, according to sharia. That in itself is a disgusting and deliberately inflammatory position, which demonstrates callousness, self-righteousness, political calculation and inhumanity in equal measure. But "butchering" someone for drawing a cartoon? Or claiming that 9/11 or 7/7 are appropriate responses, as other protestors did? That's both appalling and appallingly stupid.

Let's be clear. The gradual ratcheting up of offense over these cartoons serves the agenda of political Islamists who wish to sharpen the confrontation with "the West". It ignores the frequent manifestations of racism and xenophobia within the Muslim world - think of the kind of anti-Semitic cartoons printed weekly in the Arabic-language media in the middle east. No one should be getting on their high horse about religious offense unless they're also prepared to be equally vehement about Muslim anti-semitism. In Britain, the Muslim Council of Britain has set a very poor example by its unpleasant attitude towards Holocaust Memorial Day and Iqbal Sacranie's nasty, brutish comments about Salman Rushdie. With supposedly-respectable organisations like the MCB shot through with prejudice, it's perhaps not so surprising that many young Muslims fall victim to the politics of hate. Those of us who feel we're caught in the middle of this situation, between the equally heinous world-views of Bush and Al Mujahiroun, must be sure to keep our perspective, to call things by their proper names.

by Hari Kunzru