'Press Freedom and Religious Respect': A Debate Hosted by the Communication and Media Research Institute at the University of Westminster, 22/2/2006

Contributions appear in the order in which they appeared on the day, followed by a personal response from the issue editor. The event was webcast live on the day and can still be viewed online, using either Quick Time or Real Player at tsp://nemo.wmin.ac.uk/~mad/cartoondebate.mov

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Rania Al Malky
When he published the cartoons of the Prophet, Mr. Flemming Rose, editor of the Danish national newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, exercised his fundamental right to freedom of expression. No one has the right to take that away from him.

But what the Danish publication did in effect was not merely exercise its right to unhindered self-expression. As Cambridge philosopher Onora O'Neill pointed out in an article that ran in the *Guardian*, the cartoons were intended to provoke self-censoring Danes at the expense of offending a specific community of Danish citizens. The paper could have communicated legitimate worries about self-censorship in ways that would have found resonance and respect, had their objective been a genuine desire to spark debate.

In a press statement Traugott Schoefthaler, director of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue Between Cultures, wrote: 'It is totally unacceptable that a number of people start ideological fights in selecting human rights principles such as 'freedom of the press' against 'human dignity and mutual respect.' All human rights are an indivisible whole, according to an agreement adopted by consensus by all Member States of the United Nations in 1993'.

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The rights to free speech are enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights. As O'Neil points out, Article 10 proclaims a right to freedom of expression characterized as 'freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers'.

What most absolutists on the issue ignore, however, is the second half of the article: 'The exercise of these freedoms, since it carried with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others'.

Therefore freedom of the press is not absolute by law, a fact that consciously controls the dynamics of editorial decision-making. As *Independent* columnist Yasmin Alibahi Brown eloquently put it, 'judgments are exercised daily by newspapers on what should or should not be published. There are internalized restraints of decency and civil duties of care'.

Indeed in some countries it is illegal to deny the holocaust and in the UK the incitement of racial hatred is a crime.

The recent debacle over statements made by Frank Ellis, the University of Leeds professor who invoked freedom of speech to defend himself against accusations of racism, comes to mind. While no one can deny Ellis the right to hold whatever abhorrent, racist beliefs he may have within his own private circle, when it comes to the public sphere, the slightest implication that ethnicity plays a role in IQ levels, no matter how far he can support it with empirical evidence, cannot be tolerated in a any society, but more so in the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic societies which many European cities have become.

The analogy with the situation of Muslims in Europe is clear enough.

Some die-hard defenders of press freedom claim that to withhold publication of the cartoons is to set a dangerous precedent of self-censorship. Everything offends someone, they say. In this case it's a spurious argument. The fury at the cartoon wasn't merely about showing the Prophet Mohamed -- countless Islamic publications have done that through history despite it being generally unacceptable. It was showing an overtly offensive image of him that lit the first match.

I agree with Lawrence Pintak, Director of the e-journalism centre at the American University in Cairo, that what is missing from the debate is the fact that most Muslims – and I would add here, European Muslims in particular – are different. They come from different cultures. They see things differently. They have different thresholds for what offends. It is the failure to recognize and respect this difference from both sides that has resulted in such polarization.

Many Muslims think: Why must the Western 'tradition of lack of respect for tradition' (and in turn religion, according to Roger Koeppel, the German editor Die Welt which published the cartoons three times) be the norm to which we must all conform? Yes, everyone has the right to voice his opinion, to disagree, debate and criticize, but not to cause gratuitous offence. In democratic societies Muslims have the right to object to the desecration of what they hold sacred, but must do so within the boundaries set out by the law.

Yet the reaction of some in Europe and in the Muslim world has been outrageous and unacceptable. Burning buildings, inciting violence and issuing death threats are the acts of people who not only lack confidence in their religion, but who have little knowledge of its core message. Not only is it un-Islamic, but it is also anti-Islamic because it threatens social order and propagates fear, hatred and suspicion.

At the same time, it must be stressed that the escalation of violence didn't simply happen overnight. Danish Muslims first sent letters complaining about the insult. As expected, the letter fell on deaf ears – not a surprise considering *Jyllands-Posten*'s reputation demonstrated by the findings of a 2004 report by the European Network Against Racism which asserted that the paper 'devoted disproportionate time and space to negative reporting on ethnic minorities. The second insult came from the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who refused even to meet Muslim diplomats and community leaders to discuss the issue. At that point the boycott of Danish products began and the rest is history.

Why countries throughout Europe decided to reprint the drawings, despite the unequivocal knowledge that by doing so they risk offending 15 million of their own citizens, is a question European Muslims have to confront everyday and one that the Western media must ask itself.

The whole situation has unfortunately played into the hands of authoritarian regimes and religious radicals who manipulated the emotions of understandably distressed Muslims for their own political gain. Reactionary forces in the West jumped on the bandwagon and used the resultant chaos as an excuse to say, 'I told you so'.

It is important also to see this confrontation within the wider historic context in which it occurred. In this post 9/11 era of the war on terrorism that posits radical Islam as the new global enemy, the media must stop perpetuating a vilified image of all Muslims. This will only discourage dialogue within multicultural European communities and will exacerbate what is turning into 'a clash fundamentalisms' between the Muslim world and the mostly secular West.

Clearly there is miscommunication and ignorance on both sides of the ideological divide, but even to stress this is to ignore the fact that, in this context, the balance of power is perversely skewed to the detriment of the underdog – the economically deprived Muslim minorities who are indiscriminately associated with terrorists, thanks to a hostile media which deliberately focuses on a vocal minority of extremists who represent only themselves. In the bigger picture Arabs and Muslims believe they have suffered for years under the double standards the West applies in dealing with them.

Despite this many self-proclaimed liberals have become experts at bestowing medals of honour on those who attack the weak and back the strong. Their 'bravery' in the face of the 'Islamist threat' has become the be all and end all of Enlightenment values.

It is regrettable that a tasteless provocation, no matter how insulting it was to some Muslims, has led to the loss of human life, and that a simple exercise in common courtesy would be seen as a threat to the whole of Western civilization.

Julian Petley – Time to Re-Think Press Freedom?

In 1997 a report by the Runnymede Trust entitled *Islamophobia: a Challenge For Us All* concluded that closed and negative views of Islam are routinely reflected by the British press, and that such views 'are seen with particularly stark clarity in cartoons'. Since then, and particularly in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, these views have been expressed by newspapers with ever greater frequency and intensity – and yet not one British national paper re-published any of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons which caused such a stir in February 2006, cartoons which mirror with uncanny accuracy the attitudes of most of the British press towards Muslims and Islam. Why should this be the case?

Let's begin with the liberal press, in other words the minority papers in Britain's overwhelmingly conservative, and indeed illiberal, press culture.

Though by no means above criticism of their coverage of Muslims and Islam, the *Guardian* and *Independent* have been consistently less negative and more open in

their coverage than most other national dailies, whose Islamophobic tone they have frequently criticised. Their decision not to re-publish any of the cartoons was thus perfectly consistent with their editorial stance on reporting this whole area. Thus a Leader in the *Independent*, 3 February, argued that: 'There is, of course, no doubt that newspapers should have the right to print cartoons that some people find offensive … But there is an important distinction to be made between having a right and choosing to exercise it', which could be seen both as 'throwing petrol on the flames of a fire that shows every sign of turning into an international conflagration' and as infringing the 'right for people to exist in a secular pluralist society without feeling as alienated, threatened and routinely derided as many Muslims now do'. Maintaining that, in this instance, the responsibility to respect others' beliefs outweighed the right to publish, the paper concluded that: 'There is a deceptive borderline between controversial and irresponsible journalism. Especially in these troubled times, we must take care that it is not crossed'. And the following day, a further Leader argued that re-publishing the cartoons would have been a 'cheap gesture', concluding that: 'There is no merit in causing gratuitous offence, as these cartoons undoubtedly do'.

The *Independent on Sunday*, February 5, took a similar line, Ziauddin Sardar arguing that the idea that the ideals of liberal secularism are superior to the ideals of other cultures is 'Eurocentric and arrogant', and reaching the conclusion that the limits to free expression 'are to be found in the social consequences, the potential harm to others of an exercise of free speech. Tolerance is easy if there is nothing to offend. We become tolerant only when we defer to the sensitivities of those with whom we profoundly disagree on matters we do not believe can or should be accepted. Forbearance is the currency of peaceful coexistence in heterodox society'. In similar vein, the paper's Leader stated that, in its view, re-publication would be regarded by Muslims as a 'deliberate insult' adding: 'When the deeply held beliefs of so many people has been made so clear, it requires a particularly childish kind of discourtesy to cause offence knowingly'.

Meanwhile the *Guardian* adopted a similar stance. Thus a Leader on 3 February stated that: 'The right to publish does not imply any obligation to do so', especially if putting that right to the test inevitably causes offence to many Muslims at a time when there is 'such a powerful need to craft a more inclusive public culture which can embrace them and their faith'. In the following day's paper, Gary Younge argued that: 'The right to freedom of speech equates to neither an obligation to offend nor a duty to be insensitive. There is no contradiction between supporting someone's right to do something and condemning them for doing it', whilst Emily Bell made the point that the paper could and should not ignore the impact of publishing the cartoons - 'not least on our correspondents working in Europe and the Middle East'. Unsurprisingly, then, the paper's leader announced that: 'The Guardian believes uncompromisingly in freedom of expression, but not in any

duty to gratuitously offend. It would be senselessly provocative to reproduce a set of images, of no intrinsic value, which pander to the worst prejudices about Muslims … Freedom of expression, as it has developed in the democratic west is a value to be cherished, but not abused'.

Whilst one might wish that liberal newspapers put a higher premium on freedom of expression, one cannot in all fairness accuse the *Guardian* and *Independent* of inconsistency. The same, however, most certainly cannot be said of the conservative press, given its past (and current) representations of and attitudes to Muslims. Not, for example, of *The Times,* whose Leader on 3 February pompously intoned: 'To duplicate these cartoons several months after they were originally printed also has an element of exhibitionism to it. To present them in front of the public for debate is not a value-neutral exercise. The offence destined to be caused to moderate Muslims should not be discounted'. (This did not, however, deter the paper from having its cake and eating it by providing weblinks to sites displaying the cartoons). Nor of the *Sun*, which the same day published a credulity-busting Leader which argued that it was not re-publishing the cartoons for two reasons: 'First, the cartoons are intended to insult Muslims, and the *Sun* can see no justification for causing deliberate offence to our much-valued Muslim readers. Second, the row over the cartoons is largely a manufactured one. They were printed first in a Danish dispute over free speech. The *Sun* believes passionately in free speech, but that does not mean we need to jump on someone else's bandwagon to prove we will not be intimidated'. Similarly, it is impossible to take seriously, given its past record on this and other matters, the pious protestations of the same day's *Telegraph Leader* to the effect that the paper had chosen not to re-publish the cartoons since 'we prefer not to cause gratuitous offence to some of our readers … Our restraint is in keeping with British values of tolerance and respect for the feelings of others'.

However, the first prize for sheer gall and breathtaking hypocrisy has to go to the *Mail*, whose Leader on 3 February attempted at a stroke to airbrush out its history of 110 years of bile-spewing and hate-mongering. Freedom of speech, it tells us, is a 'treasured characteristic of a civilised society', before making one disbelieve the evidence of one's own eyes by adding: 'But great freedoms involve great responsibilities. And an obligation of free speech is that you do not gratuitously insult those with whom you disagree. While the *Mail* would fight to the death to defend those papers that printed the offending cartoons, it disagrees with the fact that they have done so'.

As it is impossible, given the past record of the conservative press on all matters Islamic, to take any of these protestations remotely seriously, one can only conclude that papers normally only too happy to misrepresent Islam and to heap

opprobrium on the heads of Muslims decided on this occasion to self-censor themselves for fear of reprisals. It's one thing to spew out anti-Muslim sentiment to no-one but your like-minded readers, but quite another to do so in the full glare of the global media spotlight, and when you're well aware of the treatment meted out to those papers which, for whatever reasons, did re-publish the cartoons. Such a stance would have required both consistency and courage, two qualities conspicuously lacking in Britain's conservative press, which is a byword for hypocrisy and which is perfectly happy to attack the weak as long as there's no chance of the weak retaliating . As Gary Younge quite correctly pointed out in the *Guardian*, 4 February: 'The right to offend must come with at least one consequent right and one subsequent responsibility. If newspapers have the right to offend then surely their targets have the right to be offended. Moreover, if you are bold enough to knowingly offend a community, then you should be bold enough to withstand the consequences, so long as that community expresses displeasure within the law'.

The other aspect of the conservative press which this affair all too clearly illuminated was its utterly cavalier attitude to freedom of expression. For most press owners, press freedom means simply freedom to exercise a property right, in other words to own and to make money from newspapers. In the hyper-competitive British newspaper market, money is not made from what we might call 'public service' journalism but from sensationalism, salacious gossip, the cult of celebrity, and, above all, pandering to readers' prejudices and reinforcing what they think they know already. In such a culture, press freedom no longer automatically means the ability to tackle difficult issues from quite possibly unpopular stances, still less to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and can indeed be airily dismissed as something of interest only to mischief-makers and foreigners – witness Simon Jenkins' characteristically *ex cathedra* (and equally characteristically pompous and wrong-headed) pronouncement in *The Sunday Times*, 5 February that: 'To imply that some great issue of censorship is raised by the Danish cartoons is nonsense. They were offensive and inflammatory. The best policy would have been to apologise and shut up'. The re-publication by certain European papers of the cartoons is dismissed as 'the idiot antics of a few continental journalists', whilst the mere suggestion by some of these papers that at least one or two of their British counterparts might consider following suit in the interests of press freedom is met with the lordly rejoinder that: 'The demand [sic] by foreign journalists that British newspapers compound their offence shows that moral arrogance is as alive in the editing rooms of northern Europe as in the streets of Falluja'.

The conservative press in Britain is never happier than when calling for the censorship of broadcasters and film-makers, and equally prone to self-censor stories which don't fit its own peculiar news agenda. Rarely, however, is the latter process quite so overt and unashamed as it was here. Such a situation is almost

beyond parody. Almost, but not quite, thanks to an absolutely spot-on editorial in *Private Eye*. Entitled 'A Free Press', it deserves reproducing in full:

> In this country we are fortunate to have a long tradition of press freedom … jewel in the crown … absolute right to publish cartoons … cornerstone of liberty … John Milton … John Wilkes … valiantly fought for … hallmark of a truly civilised society … bulwark of democracy … naturally freedom not absolute … John Locke … need to respect others' beliefs … no licence to give gratuitous offence … excitable chap, Johnny Muslim … might get bomb through window … got to be careful … funny-looking bearded bloke in the car park … perhaps this editorial's a bit strong … jolly good chaps, these Muslims … we are right behind them in banning these cartoons … those Danes should be strung up if you ask me …

Ajmal Masroor

In my opinion those cartoons should not have been published. I saw these cartoons in September in Denmark and I didn't make a big hoohah about them because I thought, 'another attack on Muslims and Islam a bunch of ignorant lunatics have gone and done, never mind', I just made my points clear to the publishers and moved on. Of course things since of course have taken a downturn since then, Muslims in that country Denmark have bee suffering pretty badly under the Danish government's racist policy on immigration etc. And when all of this escalated obviously the whole world the Muslim world became involved.

Let's really ask ourselves some key questions: is this debate about promoting freedom of expression and by saying that are we saying Islam therefore does not allow freedom of expression? I hear an undercurrent in this discussion, an undertone which suggests that Islam does not allow freedom of expression. I would like to disagree with that and say Islam does allow freedom of expression in fact there is a saying of the Prophet 'say that which is true even if it is hurtful to some people but say that is true'. The problem with these cartoons is that they are not the true character of the Prophet, peace be upon him, they depict him as a terrorist with a turban with a ticking timebomb on his head and other insults that have been based on lies, and only demonstrate a deep-rooted Islamophobia that stems from years of anti-Islamic and anti- Muslim hostilities, historic as early as the crusades. These kinds of caricatures were available then when the crusading monks and priests were masquerading across Europe gathering the 'godly' soldiers to go and kill the heretics, these others who were occupying the holy lands. So they somehow resemble those early caricatures and I don't think that is freedom of expression. That is inciting hatred.

To understand why Muslims reacted in the way they did one must understand how Muslims see the Prophet in their lives. There is a very interesting saying again of the Prophet when one of his companions, Omar came to him and said 'I love you more than anything else in the world except that I love myself more of course'. And the Prophet said, 'Omar it is not enough. Go and come back to me when you are ready to say I love you more than everything in the world including myself'. Omar went away and came back and said, 'Oh, Prophet I love you more than everything in the world including myself and my family'. The Prophet in the eyes of Muslims means a lot more than themselves. We imitate the Prophet. So insulting the Prophet in this manner is insulting us. And that's why Muslims reacted.

I agree with Rania, however some of the actions of Muslims across the Muslim world – the burning of flags, attacking embassies are un-Islamic, in fact attacking foreign embassies are completely in contradiction to the Islamic notion of protecting the honour of your guest, protecting the property of your guest even if it means at your own expense. That's what the Prophet said. Those who have done that, they certainly have violated Islamic principle in every count but that does not take us away from the feeling and the hurt that was caused, offence that was caused to one point four billion Muslims on earth.

Some of the reactions are of course more befitting to the kind and merciful characteristics of the Prophet. We had a very influential historian who wrote a book the one hundred most influential persons on earth and he chose Prophet Mohammed as the most influential as the most influential person, as the first person to appear in his book. We have Edward Gibbons, we had George Bernard Shaw, Mahatma Ghandi and many others, historically accounting the Prophet as a man of mercy and a peacemaker, so reaction for calling him anything otherwise should not be overlooked, it should be understood.

Freedom does not come without a price; it is not absolute like some of my earlier colleagues have said. I have the right to sneeze, yes but I have no right to sneeze on your face. A simple, commonsense equation, you can say what you like, yes, but why call for hatred, based on lies and lies? It does not serve anything or further any cause. These cartoons I'm afraid demonstrate a deeper level and mistrust and the desire to create repulsion of Islam and Muslims living in Europe or other parts of the Western world. And please say I'm wrong because I would like to know my assessment is wrong but they remind me of a time which our friends, our cousins I call them, Jewish communities faced in Europe. It was these caricaturings of their religious symbols and important personalities began, ended with the gas chambers, the holocaust and barbaric atrocities against a people. Am I worried? Yes. Am I questioning a new beginning of cleansing Europe of Muslims? Yes I'm

questioning. And I'm fearful that these kinds of behaviours, irresponsible as they are lead maybe to similar unfortunate situations.

Either in Europe and more importantly in the Western world Muslims and Islam are accepted as part and parcel of its own makeup. In other words, Islam is a religion of the West as well, like Christianity and Judaism, Muslims as equal citizens of Europe. And if Islam and Muslims are accepted as equal to everyone else, why is there a different level of tolerance and acceptance for Muslims and a different one for Jewish communities? Would these newspapers publish any caricatures that depict anti-semitism? Why? Because they have responsibility, sensibility and yet Muslims are being attacked. Why this disproportionate level? Would any newspaper in the world the photographs of the dead soldiers or any other members of 'the willing' who went to fight in Iraq? No, because they are sensible and their sensitivity will make them responsible, and they would fear for the great anguish it would cause to the families. And yet this is not given to the Muslims and Islam. Are we then saying Islam and Muslims are then not equal in Europe? They are the fifth column and we will treat them like that. And I am afraid and I am questioning it, and I would like an answer to say no they're not they're equal. Respecting what is sacred to Muslims isn't to compromise on freedom of speech, nor press freedom, it is merely respecting that which others consider sacred.

Let us cut to the chase, do we want to create a new common civilisation or do we want to impose one over the other? If we want to create a new, common civilisation we must accept and tolerate the other as equal, so my friends, Islam proposes a different paradigm for a new discussion, which will form and inform a new civilisation. It says yes we have the freedom to say what we like, but Islamic, Muslim freedom of speech comes with responsibilities. It says I cannot mock you, I cannot belittle you, I cannot deride you, yet I have the right to say what I like. This is the new paradigm proposed by Islam, you either accept Islam as equal to the Muslim civilisation's experience or not and if you accept it equal then why not begin a discourse that will feed into a new civilisation for a better future. Thank you.

Steven Barnett – The Cartoon Controversy: Why Publication Was Right

At the age of 15, I was a rather callow classics student to whom any kind of profanity did not come easily. I have a vivid memory of being in my school classroom on one particular occasion with around a dozen fellow pupils, preparing for a lesson in ancient Greek. Our teacher was a very kindly, mild-mannered, white-haired scholar of the old school, a knowledgeable and highly cultured man

who was the epitome of everyone's favourite uncle. He had never been heard to raise his voice.

On this particular morning, he came in while a classmate was telling me some particularly intriguing school gossip (the details unfortunately escape me). My reaction was to exclaim, quite loudly, the words 'Jesus Christ!'. It was an exclamation commonly heard in school playgrounds, offices and buses, and at times on mainstream television – even in the late sixties. I did not swear, and confined myself to what, for me, were two harmless words. At this point, the kindly, mild-mannered Greek teacher turned on me in fury and barked: 'NEVER let me hear you utter such a profanity again. How dare you speak like that in my classroom'. I was not to know that he was a deeply religious, practising Christian who took very seriously the injunction not to take the Lord's name in vain and expected others to do the same.

I had not come across such a reaction before and was stunned. It was my first taste of the offence that can be caused to deeply religious people. I have frequently thought about that mild-mannered classics teacher when watching characters in TV drama or on reality shows who regularly use words like 'God Almighty' or 'Jesus' as a term of mild frustration; or when watching Monty Python's Life of Brian, and the particularly vivid image of Eric Idle on the cross cheerfully singing 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'. More recently, the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton has described how the 'hooligan culture' of Britart almost routinely desecrates symbols of the Christian faith.

I was also brought up on the humour of a brilliant Irish comedian called Dave Allen, who on prime time TV would tell the most outrageous anti-catholic jokes involving promiscuous nuns, homosexual priests and the Pope - invariably portrayed as cavorting in some kind of compromising and humiliating sexual encounter. Allen was Catholic himself, so it was 'ok' for him to satirise the Pope, just like it was 'ok' for Jackie Mason and Woody Allen to tell anti-semitic jokes. They were offensive, they were repeated in playgrounds and workplaces, they seeped into the discourse of the nation. But believers were obliged to come to terms with the fact that, in a secular society, it was and remains acceptable to make jokes about religion, religious beliefs, and sacred religious symbols – despite regular opinion surveys by successive TV regulators finding that around 20% of the population are offended by what they consider to be blasphemous humour.

The right to tell jokes and to caricature is part of the fundamental post-Enlightenment, First Amendment right to disagree, to question, to challenge and to interrogate. By definition, that basic right must include the right to offend because challenging accepted or deeply held truths and belief systems, however integral they are to a way of life, is sometimes profoundly hurtful.

Of course there are limits, and so we come to the arguments about boundaries to absolute freedom of expression. Free speech is not absolute, and with freedoms come responsibilities: not to shout Fire! in a crowded cinema, not to broadcast state secrets that would endanger lives, not gratuitously to insult people's deeply held convictions. In the wake of the cartoon controversy, there was a plethora of newspaper editorials extolling the virtues of voluntary self-restraint and emphasising the need to respect the beliefs of others. We all agree that there should be no place for gratuitous offence, irresponsible insults, and certainly not racism. So the question we need to ask is this: was this a case of irresponsible racism disguised as free speech? Or was it a pointed and articulate attempt to illuminate a serious issue?

Here, the facts are important. As I understand it, the chain of events started with the Danish writer Kare Bluitgen looking for someone to illustrate his (factual) children's book about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Nobody wanted the job, apparently through fear of antagonising Muslim feelings about creating images of Muhammad. One artist turned down the commission on the grounds that he didn't want to suffer the same fate as Theo van Gogh, the Dutch film-maker stabbed to death by an Islamist fanatic. Two others also declined. Eventually someone agreed to do it anonymously.

This prompted a debate within the Danish press about self-censorship. The editor of the *Jyllands-Posten* (Jutland Post) decided that this fear among Danish illustrators amounted to unacceptable intimidation and he decided to confront the issue by commissioning 12 cartoons deliberately designed to satirise Muhammed.

Much was made of the fact that the resultant cartoons – with one possible exception – were not very funny, as if this somehow compounded the problem. But that is an argument about poor execution rather than malicious intent and actually misses the point. The point was that they were commissioned to demonstrate, in a satirical but not grotesque manner, that there was a real risk of free speech being suppressed in the name of religion. The cartoons were not insulting the practice of Islam nor were they insulting or demeaning Muslims as a group. They were satirising fanaticism and attempting to articulate a profound anxiety that benign drawings were being self-censored not out of respect or concern for Islamic beliefs, but out of fear of reprisals. The fact that they were clumsy is beside the point; many anti-religious jokes are not very funny.

Yes, the cartoons offended Muslims, just as my expletive offended my classics teacher and Dave Allen offended a whole generation of devout Catholics. And once the incident had been magnified into something altogether more global and

symbolic (partly by the deliberate invention of some seriously revolting cartoons of the Prophet which had nothing to do with the originals and were allegedly disseminated by radical Muslim fundamentalists), no doubt the fallout could have been more diplomatically handled. But both the intention and the publication were well within the boundaries and best traditions of free expression in a secular society.

I do accept that this argument comes with an important qualification. The *Jyllands-Posten* is a right-wing newspaper supporting a right wing government which was itself supported in power by an overtly anti-Muslim minority party. There were accusations aimed at the newspaper of deliberate provocation and thinly disguised racism. But those who have seen the cartoons have great difficulty in holding to the argument that they are intrinsically Islamophobic and racist. The foreign editor of the newspaper was quoted in the following terms: 'We didn't think the cartoons had crossed any line. Some people thought it was a good idea to publish, others didn't. We have always been the *enfant terrible* of the Danish press. Our cartoonists have made fun of politicians, Jesus and the Virgin Mary.' It is in that tradition that they were commissioned and published, and it important to understand that there was nothing in those pictures which came remotely close to the blatantly anti-semitic portrayals of hook-nosed, seedy and grotesque-looking Jews which are common fare in some Arab countries such as Syria.

Of course we want responsible journalism, we want to encourage mutual respect and understanding and civility and courtesy. We need in particular to be sensitive to the needs of ethnic minorities, who can feel unwelcome in their host nations. We can do all those things, while at the same time ensuring that we draw attention to the kind of bigotry, zealotry, intolerance and intimidation that can arise out of unchallenged religious conviction.

This is not a comment on Islam but on the whole edifice of religious extremism which can – and has – afflicted almost every religion on earth. We have seen a devout Christian blow up children in Omaha, a devout Jew assassinate an Israeli Prime Minister, devout Catholics murder innocent people on the British mainland as well as devout Muslims killing in the name of their god. In a secular society, we have to be able to challenge and poke fun at fundamentalism. It will sometimes cause offence to religious believers but offence - used responsibly – can be a vital weapon in the armoury of free expression.

I appreciate that for many devoutly or even moderately religious people, religion is often seen as a panacea for many of life's evils. For them, the acceptance of religious offence undermines the positive lessons that most religions try to teach their followers: of tolerance, respect and love for their fellow man. The history of

religious influence and belief-inspired conflict unfortunately suggests a less benign picture.

At times like this, I am reminded of a brilliant 1960s song by the peerless American satirist Tom Lehrer called 'National Brotherhood Week' in which he lists the religious, ethnic and political groups which are permanently at war with each other. He introduces it with the words: 'I'm sure we all agree that we ought to love one another and I know there are people in the world that do not love their fellow human beings… and I hate people like that.' We need Tom Lehrers for the 21st century to keep our sense of perspective, and to remind us all that free speech means there is nothing so sacred that it cannot be satirised.

Des Freedman – The Importance of Context in the Debate on the Cartoons

I am very much opposed to the publication and republication of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons. For me, it is much less a question of free speech and much more a question of racism and Islamophobia. What is absolutely crucial is the matter of context.

I am a member of the National Council of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom where there was a very lively debate about this issue following on from the publication of a statement in the name of the Campaign which was based on an eloquent, but flawed, defence of the right to free speech and the dangers that come if we don't facilitate free speech. However, what was absolutely lacking anywhere in that statement was a consideration of the context in which those cartoons were published. I think that is very dangerous and that's a word I would use deliberately. It is dangerous to abstract the whole phenomenon of free speech and freedom of expression. There are three contexts that I want to focus on here.

The first, which was I think was quite staggeringly missing from many considerations of this debate, is the context of the war on terror and the resulting demonisation of Islam and of Moslems. The daily consequences of this follow from the war on terror and the presentation and the representation of Moslems as both an enemy within and without. Just consider the implications of the increased use of stop and search of Moslems that is now systematically replacing the harassment of Afro-Caribbean youth. There is a new group of people to stop and search, so much so that even the Metropolitan Police have expressed concern publicly about the extent to which this might be counter-productive because they are stopping anyone who *appears* to be Moslem. But how do you know when you are stopping a Moslem or not? It is actually very much to do with skin colour as

that is all that the police are left with and this feeds directly into debates around racism.

Secondly there is the context of Danish politics. This is not your run-of-the mill nice, warm and cuddly social democracy but a country ruled by a government that is one of the most right-wing in Europe. The government is holding on to power thanks to the increasing popularity of the anti-immigrant People's Party. There was virtually no immigration into Denmark in 2005 and just 230 people given asylum in the whole of 2005 and they expect many fewer this year. This makes Britain seem like an absolute haven when you consider it in relation to Denmark. The politics of Denmark are important to this whole discussion.

The third context is the history of *Jyllans-Posten* itself. This is no ordinary newspaper, not really even like the *Sun*. Others have talked persuasively about the hypocrisy of the British press in relation to immigration but we are dealing here with a newspaper that supported fascism, was on record as supporting the Nazis, and has systematically publicized anti-immigrant coverage in more recent years deliberately fostering a climate of intimidation and hatred of immigrants and of Moslems.

The *Guardian* cartoonist Steve Bell argued at meeting organized by the CPBF that he absolutely supported the right to publish the cartoons based on the idea that a cartoonist's job is to 'take the piss'. I don't think these cartoons are taking the piss. Ian Knox, a cartoonist for the *Irish Times*, put it well when he argued that these are not cartoons, this isn't about 'taking the piss'. For him, as a leading cartoonist these are 'racist posters'. Now how would you deal with it if you saw racist posters, and I hope we never do see them, outside the university that are attacking for example black or Moslem students? I think that one popular reaction to them would be to take them down because they don't contribute in any way to free speech. In fact they are aimed at the suppression of the speech of one section of the population. They do not contribute to the liberal idea of a frank and open discussion. They do not tap into a project of expressing anxieties, but into an atmosphere in which an already marginalised group is to be further, and I think quite systematically, targeted.

So for me it isn't about free speech nor is it about these gentle cartoons trying to foster an intelligent and enlightened debate. People have made the point that it is an essential right to be able to attack all religions. Well it is true that all religions get attacked and it is quite right that we are able to attack religion and laugh at Monty Pythons' *The Life of Brian* as I do. But, there is one very important distinction, which is that not all religions in the current context are equal, nor are they treated equally, it is, therefore, not quite the same to 'take the piss' out of Islam given what we're going through at the moment as it is to take the piss out of an establishment

religion in this country. This raises the crucial question of power, or rather of unequal power and unequal positions in the world. There was an excellent article by the philosopher Onora O'Neill in the *Guardian* where she argued that there is an important difference between the principle of freedom of speech and the right to the freedom of expression of ordinary people. And she says the following:

> Conferring the same freedom of expression on more powerful organisations, including media organisations, is now less easily justified. Once we take account of the power of the media, we are not likely to think that they should enjoy unconditional freedom of expression. We do not think that corporations should have unrestricted rights to invent their balance sheets, or governments to damage or destroy the reputations of individuals or institutions, or to deceive their electorates. Yet contemporary liberal readings of the right to free speech often assume that we can safely accord the same freedom of expression to the powerless and the powerful (*The Guardian*, 13 February 2006).

I think that is a very sophisticated and helpful contribution to the fact that there is not an equivalence of power between different religions and therefore the way different groups of people are treated.

I could point to the anti-semitic cartoons from the pro-Nazi newspaper *die Sturmer* not because we are going through the same process where there is going to be a holocaust but to demonstrate the role of hate speech. These horrific cartoons played a role in the 1930s in fostering a climate in which it became more and more acceptable to criminalise Jews and to produce an atmosphere and legitimize a system that ultimately led to the concentration camps. And even if we are not seeing a holocaust we are certainly witnessing the fostering of a climate in which a new enemy is being created, developed in order to justify specific political actions, including the war on terror, the illegal war in Iraq and so on. We are now seeing the re-categorisation, particularly inside the US and the UK, of Moslems and Islam as a 'race'. This requires a new form of scapegoating based on the kinds of stereotypes that you saw in many of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons. It is not just about the representation of the prophet but the idea of picturing the prophet with a bomb where his turban is a quite deliberate attempt to make it acceptable for Moslems to be treated differently in and to be blamed for the war on terror.

We need new enemies. This is the logic. It isn't particularly complex logic to argue that we need new enemies and I think that this is particularly clear when you consider the context of *Jyllans-Posten*'s history and contemporary Danish politics. What I am saying is that we should be not entering into abstract debates about freedom of speech (which are in themselves not unimportant) when I believe there is a responsibility to take sides with a group of people who are being systematically

marginalized and criminalized. The principle of free speech is, in this context, being used to justify the war on terror and other illegal wars taking place or being planned. Those people who are genuinely interested in freedom of speech would do better to confront their governments who have stepped up attacks on press freedom as part of anti-terror laws rather than focusing on an incident that was deliberately designed to provoke Moslems in the current political climate.

Anthony McNicholas – A Personal Response

As the above contributions make clear, the Danish cartoons controversy raises questions both specific to the original publication and to wider issues. I will attempt to address myself to both.

On the actual row emanating from Denmark, I would say that as far as I have been able to follow it, not many people come out entirely untainted. It is surely right as Des Freedman and Ajmal Masroor pointed out to question *Jyllands-Posten*'s motives, given its history and the current political atmosphere in Denmark. It would also appear though, that some of those who protested against the cartoons, far from finding them too offensive, in fact found them not offensive enough, which is why they supplemented them, as Steve Barnet said with other, unrelated cartoons which were much more likely to offend. As he also made clear, the furore did not begin with *Jyllands-Posten* but with the author of a children's book who, as far as I have been able to determine, did not set out to offend or upset anyone. The row therefore, if you trace it back to its origins, *is* ultimately connected to freedom of expression, but not the freedom of expression of a powerful (and quite possibly malign) media organisation like *Jyllands-Posten*, but of an author, an individual citizen, and of the individual illustrators who were too nervous to take up a commission offered to them. This is not to talk about an abstraction. Looked at from this point of view, the relations of power involved in the genesis of the whole affair are somewhat different. It then begins to appear more like a question of the censorship of an individual by a group. All else follows on from that.

This attempt at censorship, underpinned by intimidation has in my opinion infected too much of the subsequent discussion of the affair. The debate at Westminster for me mirrored that in the British press in one way, in that it was carried on with a glaring absence – that of the cartoons themselves. Julian Petley was right to point out the hypocrisy in the pious self-congratulation which characterised the reporting of the decision of the British press not to republish the cartoons. If the greater part of the denizens of Fleet Street ever came into contact with a principle the results would be as fatal for them as the introduction of smallpox was historically to Native Americans. They however, were the hapless victims of avaricious aggression whereas the average British hack may be many things but innocent is not one of them. But that is another story. That said, I think

there should have been a place for a cool discussion in the enlightened sections of the British press of the merits or otherwise of the cartoons which would have necessitated publication, if only so that those without the internet could have seen for themselves what all the fuss was about. Similarly, on the day, I think the cartoons should have been in the room. Not displayed over the heads of the speakers but somewhere in the room, or shown at some point, in some fashion, again so we would all know what it was we were talking about. Speakers referred to individual cartoons and it would simply have been sensible to have been able to see them in order to determine whether or not we agreed with the interpretations given.

These cartoons undoubtedly have caused offence, as Rania Al Malky in her contribution and some members of the audience made clear. It is also clear of course in the reactions around the globe. There is however a distinction to be made between what causes offence and what is inherently offensive. Also between what is a proportionate response to an assumed provocation and what is not. It is here that for me the discussion ceases to be about the merits of a particular case involving something which offended some Muslims but a wider one about the tendency of some people who hold religious beliefs of one kind or another to expect other people who may not even believe what they believe, to act according to their wishes. It is couched in terms of the need to respect the dearly-held views of others and the obligation not to offend but what they are demanding, whether they realise it or not, is obedience.

What, after all is offence? Some people are offended very seldom, some people more often. Some people make a living out of being offended. British moral crusader Mary Whitehouse spent decades pursuing figures in the arts and media whom she felt had offended her own particular brand of Christian morality. A belief system, I might add, which the vast bulk of the population of this country had long ago put aside. Yet she was a power in the land. What she attempted to do in a long career of being offended by this and outraged by that was to force the people of Britain to live, not according to their own lights, but according to hers. This is precisely what the disparate groups protesting about plays set in Sikh temples, cartoons about the Pope, paintings of Hindu goddesses, musicals about Jerry Springer and ludicrous films like the Da Vinci Code are doing now. Just because someone is offended by something, that does not mean they are right to be, and it certainly does not, in my opinion, give them the right to determine on the basis of their feelings what someone else should or should not do. And just as it has been argued that because we have the right to publish something we do not need to exercise that right, we ought to be cautious both in what we protest about and in how we do it. To hound BBC executives and their families because they had the temerity to put on a musical which no one was forced to watch, is

disproportionate, unjust and bullying. There was in my opinion, little justification for an organised protest of even the mildest kind and certainly not for the kind of intimidatory tactics employed both on this and similar occasions in the recent past.

The right to free expression sounds very grand and is correspondingly easy to deride as self indulgent, fine for secure, well-fed, middle-class Westerners to pontificate about. There is though, an associated and more humble right – the right to read. An individual human being, reading a novel or watching a play on the television, is no threat to anyone's universe. I think that as far as possible, an individual should be able to read, to watch, to listen to anything he or she pleases. If we are to set aside that right then it has to be for the very best of reasons. That it might offend somebody is not good enough. The handful of recent examples from Britain I have alluded to here are but an indication that the right to impart and receive information is not set in stone, unassailable, but has to be defended week by week, article by article, play by play. Cartoon by cartoon.

One of the crucial functions of the media is to examine those institutions which wield power and influence in society. To varying degrees in different places, religions wield such power and influence. We simply cannot say that this area or that is off limits for criticism and must be made an exception of, whether this is driven by the best of motives such as the desire to be inclusive, or for less creditable ones such as the misguided and guilt-ridden liberalism which seems to infect some, or for the entirely dishonourable and pragmatic political reason of trying to re-gain some kind of favour with sections of the community who have been rightly alienated by an unjustifiable war. To repeat myself, we are not talking about abstractions here.

Take the recent example of the play Behzti (Dishonour), written by Sikh playwright Gurpreet Bhatti, which was the victim of religious-inspired thuggery on the one hand and abject cowardice on the other and forced off the stage. The play's subject matter had uncanny echoes of the type of abuse which went on for decades in this country, in Ireland, in the USA and beyond, where vulnerable people, very often children were abused by those with power and influence over them. These scandals, (for which the Catholic Church to speak of one but by no means the only institution involved, is rightly paying a heavy price now) were allowed to continue for so long because the actions of those with authority, especially religious authority were not sufficiently questioned. No area of life can be beyond examination, criticism, even mockery. This is true for the smallest as well as for the largest institutions. It is simply too dangerous to act otherwise. The only healthy societies, the only free societies are those which permit bad news, in which all are called to account and in which there are no dark corners. That may make us uncomfortable, it may even make us angry, but it will keep us free and safe.