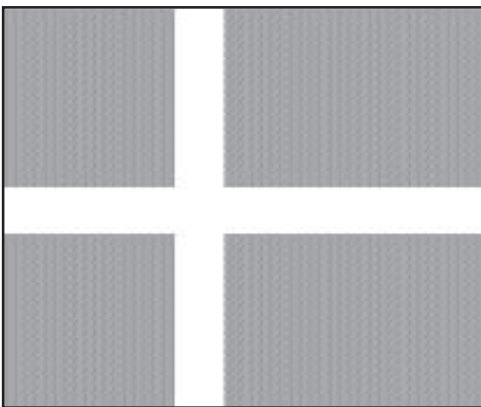


Culture and imperialism

"A terrorist and sexist religion"

Media responses to Muslim protest against Danish cartoons showing the Prophet Mohammed have tended to be hysterical and lack depth of analysis.

Salim Vally assesses Muslim responses from a left perspective and gives an historical and local context in which to view such actions.



Much of the mainstream commentary on the Danish cartoons is out of context and a-historical.

On the one hand the response to Muslim protest has been a spirited liberal defence of free speech and a shrill denunciation of religious intolerance. A commentator complained that for these champions of freedom of expression it is not about who owns, controls and commodifies the media, nor is it about giving voice to the voiceless, but is rather about the unfettered right to offend Muslims.(1)

Then there are those who influenced by the Right-wing believe that by virtue of their religion, Muslims exist on the wrong side of the law. Gary Younge writes, "As a result they are vilified: once through the cartoons, and again for exercising their democratic right to protest."(2)

On the other hand, we find descriptions in the media of largely male, frenzied mobs, blinded by their bloodlust against those who dared offend their Prophet Mohammed. Amongst those Muslims, the thinking goes, are those who did not care when the Taliban destroyed the Bamayan Buddha statues and who are complicit in the daily oppression of women.

These representations are clearly superficial. There has been limited

analysis and the dominant image has been of 'the other' as irrational, violent and intolerant.

CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM

In order to understand the present we should revisit the writings of the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. He outlined how colonialism represented Muslim subjects. The view that Muslims are bloodthirsty and misogynistic persists and is used as justification for contemporary invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as discriminatory practices in Europe.

Bernard Lewis, America's oft quoted 'Orientalist' is a case in point. Some of his conservative students are in fact the architects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq who conceive of a post war Middle East dominated by Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan all working for a so called well intentioned America. Said writes scornfully of Western hypocritical talk. Its talk of democracy, women's rights, secularism and the rights of minorities while it props up undemocratic client states of the US, like Saudi Arabia, whose rulers practice an extreme, misogynistic conservative Wahabi form of Islam.

While Said concedes that American desire for global conquest is principally economic, it is also about cultural ideas and ideologies. He pays special attention to the way a handful of



transnational corporations control the manufacture, distribution and selection of news for the world. Together with B grade Hollywood productions and shallow novels, an appetite is manufactured for dehumanising stereotypes and hostility against the cultural 'Others'.

Lost on the media is the notion that there might be histories, societies, dynamic cultures, social classes, and different religions in the region. It is also lost on former leftists who do a disservice to class analysis by ignoring the nuisance of 'race', religion, gender and identity.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said, extends his analysis to other colonized countries in Africa, Asia and South America and to the roots of imperialism in European culture and the historical experience of

resistance against empire. In the cultural resistance to empire and the assertion of nationalist identities, Said uses the phrase 'returns' to signify a search for the source of identity, where in the colonised world, often, a variety of religious and nationalist fundamentalisms are produced. He writes of the importance of not accepting the politics of identity, but understanding how identities are constructed, for what purpose, by whom and with what components. He also substitutes Franz Fanon's warning of the dangers to decolonisation by an "untutored national consciousness" by referring to an '*untutored' religious* consciousness in the form of the support given to various mullahs, evangelists and military strong men.

For decades the United States has waged a cultural war against Arabs and Islam. Racist caricatures suggested that people in the Middle East were terrorists or sheiks, and that the region is a large arid slum, fit only for profit or war. The cartoons from Denmark

continue the trend.

One cartoon depicts the Prophet with a turban in the form of a bomb with a lit fuse. Another has the Prophet telling a queue of charred suicide bombers, "Stop, stop, we've run out of virgins". It shows suicide bombers as irrational and fanatical Muslim males in line with Israeli and Western state propaganda. For Mahmood Mamdani, "At the heart of the offense is their message... The no-frills genre of the cartoon conveys the message starkly and without qualification: this is a terrorist and sexist religion." (3)

The fig leaf of concern expressed by Bush, Rice, Rumsfeld, Blair and Straw over the cartoons is hypocrisy and deceit. They clearly fear the force of mass anger and resistance despite their military overkill, the pornography of war and snuff films at Abu Ghraib prison, the torture of prisoners and desecration of religious books at Guantanamo Bay.

In the United States, public opinion surveys have found that more than one fourth of all American Muslims have experienced Islamophobia or know someone who has. Over 200 000 American Muslims have been subjected to some kind of law enforcement since 9/11. At least 15 000 Muslims have been detained and 16 000 deported or in the process of being deported.

EUROPE AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

The Danish cartoons are a continuation of the demonisation of European Muslims even those who have lived in Europe for a few generations. Muslims in Europe are subjected to routine discrimination

on suspicion that they are terrorists and Denmark has some of Europe's most draconian immigration policies.

The Danish Queen and politicians routinely compare Muslims to a 'cancer' and the 'enemy within'. Of the 300 000 immigrants in the country, 70% are Muslim. The Danish government has slashed immigrant welfare payments and barred marriage of Danes to 'foreigners' before the age of 24. There is not a single Muslim cemetery in the country and permission to build a mosque in Copenhagen was denied. To win support even mainstream politicians echo the far Right in using immigrants as scapegoats on which to blame social problems.

To better understand the situation of European Muslims it is helpful to look at the uprising in France late last year. About four months prior to the uprising, a ban on Muslim headscarves in public schools was passed in the name of strengthening the secular state. This conceals a bias in favour of Catholic schools which cater for two million children and receive 80% of the government education budget. There is only one Muslim school in France, opened after eight years of negotiation. The French state has refused to recognise Eid-al-Adha alongside Catholic festivals. The Interior Minister Sarkozy threatened to "pressure wash away scum" from the housing estates. Popularly known as 'Sarko, the American', Sarkozy is a supporter of Bush's policies in the Middle East. Earlier President Chirac referred to the "noise and smell" of immigrants.

The uprising began when two young men of African descent were electrocuted while fleeing from the police. In two weeks over

9 000 cars were torched and thousands of youth arrested. The attack on cars, symbols of social mobility denied to the youth in the housing estates, and attacks against police, seen as representatives of an exclusionary social order, were symptoms of deep seated problems.

Conservatives in the United States such as Fuad Ajami and Daniel Pipes read the events as a 'clash of civilisations' and alluded to a terrorist conspiracy. The rage of young African and Arab youth, some of whose families have lived in France for over three generations, was rather a response to unemployment, poverty, school failure, police harassment and widespread racist discrimination. For longer than a decade the French government like others in Europe has embarked on a policy of neo-liberal economic reforms and a war on terror linked to Islamophobia.

Neo-liberal reforms have slashed social welfare benefits, the funding for neighbourhood associations, after school programmes, community policing and internships for students. Since the mid-90s the 'war on terror' has resulted in a form of militarisation of housing projects with the national police and military gendarmes conducting sweeps ostensibly for suspected terrorists, closing down basement prayer rooms, detaining and deporting undocumented migrants and performing numerous 'random' security checks on local youth in public places.

Instead of understanding the discontent of youth living in marginalised neighbourhoods, politicians and some academics have further stigmatised African and Arab youth. A literary theorist

Tzvetan Todorov argued that the riots were caused by Muslim youth obsessed with behaving in a 'macho' way. The writer Helene Carrere informed the media that the riots were caused by the polygamous marital practices of Muslim immigrants from West Africa!

RISE OF ISLAMIST PARTIES

The response by most Middle Eastern and Muslim majority countries to the cartoon issue has been interesting. Many recalled their ambassadors from Denmark and even instituted a boycott of Danish products. Actions not carried out against US, British and Israeli companies despite popular clamour to do so. Even pro-American countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are trying to bolster their Islamic legitimacy in the eyes of the public. They have been shaken by the electoral victory of Hamas, the rise of Islamist parties, popular discontent with the occupations in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as by worker struggles in their countries.

Over the past decade Islamist parties have channelled popular anger against their governments and imperialism to support for their organisations. The development of Islamism is a dominant current in the region. Some see it as belonging to the conservative end of the nationalist spectrum. But perhaps we can see some of the Islamist parties in the same way we would view organisations advocating liberation theology in South America. Islamist organisation, whether it is the FIS in Algeria, groups in South East Asia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine, should not be lumped together. We must

understand them in relation to the local dynamic. Many activists drawn to radical Islamists are those who in an earlier generation made up the cadre of the left. They gravitate to a cause which alone seems to challenge their state and imperialism.

There are obvious dangers. The novelist Hanif Kureishi portrays this in an essay 'Erotic Politicians and Mullahs'. "This... would have pleased and then disappointed Third World intellectuals and revolutionaries from an earlier era, like Fanon and Guevara. This talk of liberation – at least the acknowledgement of the virtue of the toiling masses, the struggle against neocolonialism, its bourgeois stooges, and American interference – the entire recognisable rhetoric and freedom ends... with the country on its knees, in prayer. Having started to look for itself it finds itself... in the eighth century."

The left in places such as Iraq, Iran, Egypt and Palestine for decades was at the head of mass movements. The mistakes of the

left, state repression and the collapse of the Soviet Union sapped the strength of most organisations. In many parts of the Middle East though, worker struggles have emerged and the left has become more vocal.

An example is the Kifaya (Enough) democracy movement in Egypt. It has struck a chord with millions who have endured almost 25 years of repression under the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Kifaya has begun to forge links with worker and peasant movements. The level of strike activity has increased in the past year.

Since 1974 Egypt has been a laboratory for neo-liberalism. Former President Sadat reversed many of the reforms conceded by Nasser in the 1950s and 60s to a well organised mass movement. For 20 years market reforms such as privatisation went hand in hand with a regime of political terror. Hundreds of factories have closed, food shortages occur and prices rise as the majority of the 72 million population slide into poverty. In this climate, the Islamist

Muslim Brotherhood despite their banning, has grown in popularity. Worker struggles such as the eight month occupation of the Ora Misr factory near Cairo have grown in intensity and frequency.

The global reaction to the cartoons is not intelligible without reference to the overall logic of colonialism and the incendiary mix it has created. Nor can we make sense of the issue without looking at the significance of the local context – in the United States, Europe or Muslim dominated countries.

Throughout the region, the cartoon controversy has allowed as Mamdani observes, "...those shut out of public life, extremist or not... an issue which they can call their governments to account without fear of facing direct repression; so they press home their point that the War on Terror their governments have joined unreservedly is at its core a war against Islam and Muslims. Here, then, is an issue which allows local civil society an opportunity to exercise freedom of speech to confront their own governments..."

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References

¹ Peter Waterman, *Response to an open letter to my Danish friends*, *Debate Digest*, Feb., 28th, 2006.

² Gary Younge, *The Guardian*, Feb., 4th, 2006.

³ Mahmood Mamdani, *The Political Uses of Free Speech*, Submitted to Portside, Unpublished.

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