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Islamophobia and free speech

Danish cartoons controversy - documents

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We publish here the statement of the February meeting of the FI's international Committee on the Danish cartoon controversy, the statement by the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark, the statement of Socialist Resistance in Britain, authored by Piers Mostyn and an article by Tariq Ali.

Statement of the International Committee of the FI

1. Writings or cartoons by members of dominant communities vilifying the religion of minority groups that are targets of racism are just a manifestation of oppression and incitation to racial hatred. They should be denounced as such and fought by political and legal means where appropriate.

2. Freedom of expression is primarily involved in cases when writers or artists defy the prohibitions of their own governments or religions' prohibitions which often take the form of blasphemy laws. Several writers or artists of Muslim origin face governmental coercion and or oppression and/or threats from fundamentalist forces. Their freedom of expression should be firmly defended.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/MuslimsLondon.jpg>] London demo against cartoons

3. The anti-Muslim Danish newspaper's cartoons, as every manifestation of islamophobia and imperialist and racist contempt, have been exploited as a pretext by the Muslim counterparts of the Western right and far-right in order to enhance the position of Islamic fundamentalist groups or as a device to disorientate mass discontent against a minor member of the imperialist system.

4. The fight against racism, anti-immigrant policies and imperialist wars should not be counterposed to the fight for democratic rights and freedoms. They should be combined: we oppose racism and imperialism but do not condone anti-democratic currents within this general struggle; we defend freedom of expression but fight against every expression of racism and oppressive ideologies.

Statement by the National Executive of the Red Green Alliance (Enhedslisten), Denmark

The Cartoons are the last symbolic straw that breaks the camel's back

The widespread protests against Denmark are an unmistakable sign that the political course of Denmark and the West must fundamentally change. The protests are to be seen in the context of the general political atmosphere, as well as of Western policy in the Muslim part of the world. The cartoons are but the last symbolic straw that breaks the camel's back.

During several years xenophobic views have been given more and more space in public debate in Denmark. All around the world, Denmark has become known as a country with very negative attitudes to immigrants and refugees. It is in this context that the publication by Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten of the 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad should be seen - the paper explaining this on the grounds that Muslims should be prepared to put up with "insult, derision and ridicule" (quoted from the article in the paper introducing the cartoons).

Jyllands-Posten expressed this xenophobic line on the pretext of defending the freedom of expression. The publication of the cartoons is of course within the boundaries of the right to freedom of expression, but Jyllands-Posten mismanages this freedom in a deeply irresponsible way.

The Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the Government should have dissociated themselves clearly and unequivocally from the expressed aim of the cartoons - without disputing the unreserved freedom of expression of Jyllands-posten subject to the consequences of the law. This could have averted the crisis.

However, the Prime Minister chose to appeal to xenophobic currents within the Danish population by only defending the freedom of expression of Jyllands-Posten - without in any kind of way addressing the content of the cartoons. As part of this pandering to xenophobic attitudes the Prime Minister chose arrogantly to reject a meeting with the ambassadors from a number of Muslim countries. A rejection that is quite unheard of when the ambassadors of other countries request a meeting.

To explain his rejection the Prime Minister claimed for months that the ambassadors had demanded of him in their letter to intervene with the newspaper. Instead it has turned out that the ambassadors wished to have a dialogue with him against the background of the harsh debate in Denmark on the issue of immigrants and refugees, not least by the rightwing Danish People's Party, and the cartoons were only one of several points mentioned by them in their letter. By rejecting meeting the ambassadors the Prime Minister chose confrontation instead of dialogue and is therefore responsible for deepening the crisis.

The cartoons have become a symbol of how many Muslims see themselves treated in Denmark and in other parts of the world,

- ▶ where Muslims are exposed to hatred
- ▶ with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
- ▶ with Western countries supporting Israel, whereas Palestinians are humiliated and denied a state of their own.

Western conduct is therefore part of the background for the massive protests among Muslims. These protests have comprised quite legitimate forms of expression, including the boycott of goods, which is annoying, but peaceful and acceptable, contrary to quite unacceptable forms such as threats against persons and the burning of embassies.

In several countries the massive show of protests can as well be seen as a reaction to dictatorial and incompetent regimes, which have often been installed by the West and are allies of the USA or other Western countries.

Resolving this crisis will be a huge task, even when the demonstrations against Denmark have subsided.

Right now the Danish Government must take the consequences of the cartoons being part of failed and humiliating asylum and migration policies. The Government must take steps to promote reconciliation with the minorities in this country affected by these policies, Muslims and others. Such an admission of fact and such an initiative would signal to the rest of the world that we take this problem seriously and that we will do something about it.

The Government must take the initiative in abolishing the discriminatory laws affecting immigrants and asylum seekers, as for example the prohibition of marriage and the introduction of an exceptionally low social security benefit. There is a need as well to legislate to secure equality between all religions.

To be able to ensure such a development the Government will have to distance itself from the policies and rhetoric of

the Danish People's Party with regard to immigrants and refugees. At the same time we call upon Muslims to dissociate themselves from extreme fundamentalist Islamic positions. This would be the start of establishing a debate on immigrants and refugees, which would not be restricted to the circles of the most extreme forces on the Danish right wing and among Muslims.

Globally there is a need for:

- ▶ A speedy end to the occupation of Iraq. Denmark must withdraw its troops immediately from Iraq and Afghanistan
- ▶ New and efficient steps must be taken to secure the right of the Palestinian people to a state of their own
- ▶ World trade must be changed so that the poorest countries, among them some of the Muslim countries, can improve their chances to create an independent economic development
- ▶ Increase the support to strengthen the development of democracy in Arab and other countries, as opposed to Western propping up of reactionary regimes as in Saudi Arabia.

The National Executive of Enhedslisten/the Red-Green Alliance, February 12, 2006

Socialist Resistance (England and Wales) statement - Islamophobia and the Cartoons

Piers Mostyn

Cartoons have been published in a number of European papers attacking the Muslim religion and Muslims. Whether dressed up as "criticism", "satire" or "humour" they are undoubtedly provocative - humiliating and offending Muslims through caricatured representations of the Muslim Prophet. Whether or not this was intended or even understood initially is now of little relevance. By the time of their reproduction in several countries it must have been.

Across the globe there have been a storm of protests that have resulted in a number of deaths. Initially debated as an issue centring on the content of the cartoons and their intent, it has predictably shifted to a focus on "extremism" in the Muslim community.

This is not an abstract question concerning religion and its criticism - reducible to debates over philosophy, theology, secularism or free speech - despite the mainstream media's presentation.

With some exceptions, disputes over religion also tend to have a specific political meaning and dynamic, particular to the period and the place in which they occur. History is littered with examples - from the 15th and 16th century European wars of supremacy in which Catholicism and Protestantism were ideological badges in a struggle for hegemony between nascent imperial powers to the waves of anti-Semitism from the 12th century to the holocaust and so on.

Today the background is one of a febrile global atmosphere of imperialist wars on Muslim countries, Islamophobia stoked up by the media, a wave of physical attacks on the Muslim community, the incessant witch hunting of "extremists" and draconian state assaults on civil liberties directed against that community. Behind this lies a political polarisation in which the far right has gained strength and mainstream political discourse (incorporating social democratic as well as rightist parties) routinely includes xenophobia, repression of migrants and so forth.

In this context the objective dynamic of the cartoons and their continued republication is one of racism against an oppressed community.

There is nothing new about this type of racism. It is more commonly known as bigotry. It has been seen in the North of Ireland where the caricaturing of Catholics in speeches, cartoons and the like as "papists" has to be understood as part of a sectarian ideology underpinning the protestant ascendancy upon which British rule is based. Such an understanding stands irrespective of the fact that Catholicism and in particular it's hierarchy around the pope is reactionary and oppressive.

Unfortunately there were some who stood to one side - simply denouncing "sectarianism" in all communities in an abstract sense, often in the name of some "pure" form of secular class politics, and failing to defend the community under attack. This ended up, perhaps unwittingly, gutting the issue of it's politics by allowing it to be portrayed as simply a "communal" or "religious" conflict between communities without emphasising the role of the state and imperialism.

In present circumstances the duty of all who oppose the war and racism and stand for civil liberties is to defend the Muslim community. This remains the case irrespective of the fundamentalist character of some of those who have protested against the cartoons or reactionary states that have hijacked the issue - both of which should be denounced.

The current climate is fuelled by right wing, racist elements that have jumped on the bandwagon of Islamophobia and are deliberately using a legitimate "freedom of the press" as a Trojan horse for their own reactionary agenda. The rest of the establishment has either encouraged this or been powerless to confront it - due to it's complicity with or failure to oppose the recent imperialist wars and authoritarian attacks in which precisely the same community has been the prime target.

Part of this rightist agenda that needs to be challenged is the implication that the Muslim communities are in some way responsible for the racist tirade. As though "extremists" can have somehow provoked it. To accept this is to ignore the political context. It is as wrong as to claim that the 9/11 attacks provided some justification for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is simultaneously necessary to defend freedom of speech. Again this is not an abstract question and cannot be done outside of an anti-racist perspective that acknowledges the political context. Censorship of the media, particularly by the state, must be opposed.

There has to be freedom of speech on religion as on all questions of politics, philosophical outlook and morality. This is why it has been necessary to oppose the legislation proposing to criminalise the incitement of "religious hatred" that is currently being debated in the British parliament. This is not the solution. Censorship and criminalisation will only strengthen the very state power responsible for stoking up the Islamophobia in the first place.

The way to combat such racism and bigotry is through mass organisation and united front mobilisation, learning the lessons of the anti-war movement's defence of the Muslim community and civil liberties. This will marginalise and discredit those peddling it.

Mobilisations should be around slogans that will maximise mass support and unite communities - through opposition to racism and Islamophobia, defence of minority communities and linking these questions to opposition to the "war on terror" and attacks on civil liberties of which they form an integral part. Slogans that restrict defence to support for Islam or a particular interpretation of it will exclude all those from other faiths and those with none, as well

as ignoring the fact that all faiths and communities comprise many different strands and are not homogenous.

There should be no curb on freedom to criticise Islam (or other religions) including by those within that community. All religions include elements that are reactionary and oppressive - in particular to women and those of different sexual orientation. This needs to be challenged. It is also right to challenge the involvement of religion in the state and in education - to defend secularism.

But it is perfectly possible for such debate to respect the right of all to practice their own religion, to have pride and dignity in their culture, community and identity whilst standing firm against the racist and Islamophobic agenda and defending the Muslim community.

This is the real outrage

Tariq Ali, Monday February 13, 2006, The Guardian UK.

Amid the cartoon furore, Danish imams ignore the tragedies suffered by Muslims across the world.

The latest round of culture wars does neither side any good. The western civilisational fundamentalists insist on seeing Muslims as the other - different, alien and morally evil. Jyllands-Posten published the cartoons in bad faith. Their aim was not to engage in debate but to provoke, and they succeeded. The same newspaper declined to print caricatures of Jesus.

I am an atheist and do not know the meaning of the "religious pain" that is felt by believers of every cast when what they believe in is insulted. I am not insulted by billions of Christians, Muslims and Jews believing there is a God and praying to this nonexistent deity on a regular basis.

But the cartoon depicting Muhammad as a terrorist is a crude racist stereotype. The implication is that every Muslim is a potential terrorist. This is the sort of nonsense that leads to Islamophobia.

Muslims have every right to protest, but the overreaction was unnecessary. In reality, the number of original demonstrators was tiny: 300 in Pakistan, 400 in Indonesia, 200 in Tripoli, a few hundred in Britain (before Saturday's bigger reconciliation march), and government-organised hoodlums in Damascus burning an embassy. Beirut was a bit larger. Why blow this up and pretend that the protests had entered the subsoil of spontaneous mass anger? They certainly haven't anywhere in the Muslim world, though the European media has been busy fertilising the widespread ignorance that exists in this continent.

How many citizens have any real idea of what the Enlightenment really was? French philosophers did take humanity forward by recognising no external authority of any kind, but there was a darker side. Voltaire: "Blacks are inferior to Europeans, but superior to apes." Hume: "The black might develop certain attributes of human beings, the way the parrot manages to speak a few words." There is much more in a similar vein from their colleagues. It is this aspect of the Enlightenment that appears to be more in tune with some of the generalised anti-Muslim ravings in the media.

What I find interesting is that these demonstrations and embassy-burnings are a response to a tasteless cartoon. Did the Danish imam who travelled round the Muslim world pleading for this show the same anger at Danish troops being sent to Iraq? The occupation of Iraq has costs tens of thousands of Iraqi lives. Where is the response to that or the

tortures in Abu Ghraib? Or the rapes of Iraqi women by occupying soldiers? Where is the response to the daily deaths of Palestinians? These are the issues that anger me. Last year Afghans protested after a US marine in Guantánamo had urinated on the Qur'an. It was a vile act and there was an official inquiry. The marine in question explained that he had been urinating on a prisoner and a few drops had fallen accidentally on the Qur'an - as if pissing on a prisoner (an old imperial habit) was somehow more acceptable.

Yesterday, footage of British soldiers brutalising and abusing civilians in Iraq - beating teenagers with batons until they pass out, posing for the camera as they kick corpses - was made public. No one can seriously imagine these are the isolated incidents the Ministry of Defence claims; they are of course the norm under colonial occupations. Who will protest now - the media pundits defending the Enlightenment or Muslim clerics frothing over the cartoons?

It's strange that the Danish imams and their friends abroad ignore the real tragedy and instead ensure that the cartoons are now being reprinted everywhere. How will it end? Like all these things do, with no gains on either side and a last tango in Copenhagen around a mountain of unused butter. Meanwhile, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine the occupations continue.