

Section Three

Religion, Politics and the Press

Chapter Nine: A Battle for Freedom of Speech

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*Seminar: The Mohammed crisis in centre of discussion at Kaj Munk seminar.
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Arguments for freedom of speech were exchanged so vividly that the pugnacious Kaj Munk would have been on edge if he had been able to participate this day at Aalborg University. The University hosted the international Kaj Munk seminar on freedom of speech, “From Munk to Mohammed”.

Professor Søren von Dönnert and Parish Rector Svend Aage Nielsen presented various aspects of Kaj Munk’s struggle against censorship to the international audience and the seminar also included lectures on the feeble conditions of freedom of speech in Nazi Germany, as well as in the occupied Norway and Denmark.

Extra attention arose as the day was concluded by a round table discussion on the Danish Mohammed crisis. The participants in this discussion were former Editor-in-Chief for *Politiken*, Mr. Herbert Pundik; Cultural Editor at *Jyllands-Posten*, Mr Flemming Rose; Public Relations Manager of the Catholic Church in Denmark, Ms Iben Tranholm; as well as Editor and Commentator of the Turkish newspaper *Turkish Daily News*, Mr. Yusuf Kanli.

Rose stood alone in his defence of the publication of the Mohammed drawings which were condemned by the other participants around the table. Nevertheless, he gained obvious support from the audience during the subsequent session for questions.

Religion is under attack

Iben Tranholm regretted the constant attack on religion in the modern society and blamed Flemming Rose of transforming freedom of speech into a weapon of terror. She warned against the freedom-of-speech-fundamentalism of which she also blamed the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. If a concept is deemed higher than the individual person, you have taken the first steps on the path towards totalitarianism, Tranholm argued.

Yusuf Kanli called the publication of the prophet drawings an irresponsible act of an irresponsible editor. The holiest values were violated, Kanli said, and declared that he was not a practising Muslim but nevertheless shared the feelings of the Muslims. “It was a totally unacceptable action”, a clearly angry Turkish editor pronounced. “How can you speak of the co-existence and multiculturalism of civilizations and at the same

time expect that such violations are accepted”, Yusuf Kanil stated – who had given lectures earlier that day on censorship against Turkish media.

Move towards absolutism

Herbert Pundik also attacked the publication of the drawings which, in his eyes, testified a move towards a sort of absolutism. Behind the freedom of speech needs to be consideration and careful contemplation of which price others will have to pay for this freedom. Muslims in Denmark are at the bottom of society in terms of social status. *Jyllands-Posten* therefore brutally inflicted pain upon the weakest point of society, Pundik argued.

No group should be treated as children, Flemming Rose replied and he warned against describing freedom of speech as a “weapon of terror”. If the social debate needs to pay separate attention to religion, this situation will probably be more dangerous in the long run.

“And then what about the hundreds of other groups with other taboos which they want respected?”. “You cannot ensure anyone the rights not to be insulted. I am insulted every day when reading *Politiken*”, Rose directed at Pundik – however, without wanting the newspaper to be censored.

Iben Tranholm shivered by the thought of an inhumane society of robots in which it was not allowed to be insulted. Man is first and foremost a moral being. Society is losing the sense of holiness, she argued, and called for higher moral standards in order to be able to coexist with our new fellow citizens.

Lack of consideration

Yusuf Kanli declared that the more he was listening to this debate in English, the more disbelief he felt. “It cannot be justifiable that man is able to neglect all contemplation, common sense, responsibility and consideration. A man cannot just do whatever suits him”, Kanli argued and stressed the fact that he did not mind depiction of the Prophet unless in the coinage between Islam and terrorism. Herbert Pundik declined the idea of treating Danish Muslims as children.

“I am referring to socially strong and weak groups. And Danish welfare is built upon consideration of the weak groups”, the former chief editor of *Politiken* argued. “You cannot simply demand that Danish Muslims must understand us. They don’t – not until two or three generations. Until then, we need to accept a one-sided dialogue”, Pundik said.

Yusuf believed that it is a problem for Europe that we are not fully serene about the position of religion. “What role does religion play in Europe? The Europeans must make up their minds about this. And if peace-loving people like us in this panel cannot

come to terms with each other – how can we then expect this from the militarists?”, he asked.

As a final remark, Flemming Rose stated that he found the contrast between freedom of speech and religious freedom entirely false.

“When Martin Luther called for battle against the Catholic Church, he conducted a so-called hate speech. He claimed the right to be heterodox. Freedom of speech and religious freedom supplement each other”, he argued.

The intolerance was experienced by the Danish imams, he said and concluded the very lively debate with a wish that the drawings from Jyllands-Posten would appear in children’s schoolbooks some day so that children of all backgrounds would be able to discuss and exchange views just as this panel in Aalborg had.

Chapter Ten: Time to Re-Think Press Freedom?

Julian Petley

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’ (Richardson: 21). 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 and Sundays, 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*, 5 February, 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