

Letters on the anti-Muslim cartoons

15 February 2006

The following is a selection of letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to a number of articles written on the anti-Muslim cartoons published in Denmark.

On "European media publish anti-Muslim cartoons: An ugly and calculated provocation"

This is undoubtedly one of the best analysis on the widely discussed issue related to the cartoons published by *Jyllands-Posten* of Denmark. These drawing have depicted maliciously the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist and lewd person. As correctly stated in the article, a genuine critique of religion can be conducted only on the highest intellectual level, appealing to science and reason—not ignorance and fear. Instead, the ruling clique of Denmark has resorted to vulgar tactics of racism and xenophobia in marginalizing the minority Muslim community of Denmark who only represent 3 percent of the population. In this respect what Queen Margrethe II of Denmark has stated on 15 April 2005 is worth noting. "We are being challenged by Islam these years—globally as well as locally. It is a challenge we have to take seriously. We have let this issue float about for too long because we are tolerant and lazy. We have to show our opposition to Islam and we have to, at times, run the risk of having unflattering labels placed on us because there are some things for which we should display no tolerance. And when we are tolerant, we must know whether it is because of convenience or conviction."

That *Jyllands-Posten* of Denmark had deliberately targeted the Muslim community has been revealed in a recently published article in the British daily *Guardian* (Feb. 6, 2006). About three years ago the newspaper had refused to publish satirical cartoons on Jesus Christ submitted by Danish illustrator Christoffer Zieler, because these were considered "offensive, not funny." The editor told Christoffer Zieler, "I don't think *Jyllands-Posten*'s readers will enjoy the drawings. As a matter of fact, I think that they will provoke an outcry. Therefore, I will not use them." A few weeks ago, the cultural editor of the *Jyllands-Posten* told Dan Bilefsky of the *International Herald Tribune* that "he would not publish a cartoon of Ariel Sharon strangling a Palestinian baby, since that could be construed as 'racist'." Also it has been revealed that Flemming Rose, the cultural editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, maintains close contacts with the USA. Thus, the whole episode of publication of these ugly cartoons was very well calculated under the present global context.

The editorial board of WSWs is correct to point out the dismal failure of the Scandinavian left parties to challenge seriously the forces that promote racism and xenophobia in all these countries (Norway, Denmark and Sweden). These parties are just paying lip service and often collude with the ruling cliques of these countries. They have done very little to protect the oppressed minorities from another holocaust that is looming on the horizon of Europe.

RA

6 February 2006

Maybe the cartoons are in bad taste, but they are not worthy of this degree of heated criticism. Why do you not criticize those seen holding signs in protest in London, I believe it was, where they openly displayed horrific messages such as "Europe you will pay, your 9/11 is on its way," and "The only solution is for those responsible to be killed. In Islam, the one who insults the messenger should be killed." All this for a some

stupid cartoons? You should get your priorities straight. Those who openly advocate terrorism and murder are far, far more worthy of a critical editorial.

RF

4 February 2006

I would expect the WSWs to analyze this situation from the perspective of what serves best the historic interests of the world working class. While these cartoons may be a provocation by a fascistic publication in the political context you describe, free speech applies to such provocations too. As Paul Bond replied to Johann Hari, "For our part, we would also defend the right of Mr. Hari to spout his imperialist apologetics. We merely reserve the right to call them by their proper name."

The preparation of police-state measures throughout the democratic West finds an obstacle in free speech, which is of much greater benefit to working class political organization and propaganda dissemination than is the bourgeoisie of Islamic countries.

In that sense freedom of speech is not an abstract moral principle, but a vital tool for the independent organization of the working class, even as our ruling classes embark upon neo-colonialist adventures. Such adventures carry great dangers for our rulers in their wings. If the crisis facing the working class is one of leadership, it is exacerbated by that leadership's inability to communicate with the class. Defend free speech!

RBV

4 February 2006

We all agree to the right of free speech within the limits of law. We must also respect any faith or belief. But we do not have any right to insult others. The holy people are like holy lands. They must not be insulted. One person's irresponsible exercise of freedom of speech is costing so dearly, and horribly, that many countries, peoples and their relations are badly suffering. Please let us pledge not to repeat this trend/practice. We must respect all faiths and their prophets/holy people and holy books.

MM

6 February 2006

Effete humanists may be disgusted by sectarian bigots and rabble rousers fostering anti-Muslim feelings in Europe and the world, but your article does not take into account the visceral disgust a significant minority, if not a majority, that less effete free thinkers have with all religion. The fact that reactionaries of the right again are promoting hatred of Islam, as they did of Jews, etc., does not obviate the fact that Islam is used to subject workers to abuse by the power elite in Islamic regions. As the late and unlamented chairman Mao said, "a revolution is not a tea party." All religions are absurd and fair prey for crude users of satire.

LL

Whitehall, Pennsylvania

4 February 2006

On "Death toll mounts in worldwide protests against anti-Muslim cartoons"

I consider myself a very clever individual who can look at all sides of an issue, but you caught me napping. I had not thought of the Martin Luther King analogy for this cartoon: "Suppose further, that this provocative cartoon resulted in angry and even violent protest demonstrations, and that, in 'solidarity,' major daily newspapers in the United States

proclaimed it their duty to defend 'press freedom' by reprinting the overtly racist cartoon on their front pages? What would be the reaction of those who are today lining up behind the right-wing provocateurs in the name of 'press freedom'?" Thanks for clouding the issue for me when I thought that I'd had it all figured out. Keep up the good work.

PK

8 February 2006

I've been reading WSWS for years, and it is amazing how often you are truly the only place to get an issue right. Your understanding of this cartoon issue is one of many times you've been clear-sighted and decent when everyone else wrote garbage (another one that I remember in particular was your coverage of the Jayson Blair "scandal"). So I'm just writing to say thanks for everything since about 1998 and keep it up.

RM

8 February 2006

I disagree completely. This is free speech. And the right of free speech is the right to offend anybody, and anything. I don't care if it's putting a Christian cross in a jar of piss, or burning the flag. It's not harming anyone. If you are offended, get over it. Religion has no more rights than politics, or a football game. The only way to reduce offensive speech is to allow it. If nobody cares, there is no reason to do it. These riots are not about free speech and cartoons. This is something else, and won't be settled by hindering free speech.

WA

Alaska

8 February 2006

On "Bush condemns protests against anti-Muslim cartoons"

The reaction of the European bourgeoisie to protests by Muslims against the racist cartoons recalls the words of Steven Bantu Biko: "Not only are whites kicking us; they are telling us how to react to being kicked."

EG

10 February 2006

On "Denmark and Jyllands-Posten: The background to a provocation"

Further evidence of the deliberately calculated nature of this provocation was provided on Democracy Now! in which Jytte Klausen, associate professor of Comparative Politics at Brandeis University, reveals that one week before publishing the cartoons, at a meeting of the two ruling coalition parties, Danish Culture Minister Brian Mikkelsen said Denmark has won round one of the cultural battle, and it was now time to eliminate all multicultural relativism in Denmark. A Guardian story also reports that the same newspaper decided against publishing cartoons lampooning Jesus Christ in 2003. The editor, Jens Kaiser, justified the decision thusly: "I don't think *Jyllands-Posten*'s readers will enjoy the drawings. As a matter of fact, I think that they will provoke an outcry. Therefore, I will not use them." Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark.

SE

San Jose, California

10 February 2006

Having heard on *Democracy Now!* that the same newspaper, which published these controversial cartoons depicting Mohammed, earlier refused to publish cartoons ridiculing Jesus, I better understand why WSWS is so critical of the newspaper, but only because in my view the newspaper should have published the Jesus cartoons as well.

If this cartoon episode shows anything, it is the danger of religiosity, and it is that danger that should have the attention of your commentary, as well as the hypocrisy of the newspaper. Instead, your remarks are written in a way that suggests that the rioting and violence are somehow justified even while you claim the contrary.

I suggest the tone of your articles is a result of the fact that religion has been given a pampered place—it has become a truism that it is off limits to criticize, never mind ridicule, someone's religious beliefs—and that has emboldened those who hold these fantastic beliefs. They now demand not

only the right to believe whatever; they also demand that the beliefs themselves, however absurd or even harmful they might be (e.g., the various religious beliefs that denigrate women), are owed respect.

By respecting someone's right to believe anything, profound or foolish, I mean there should be no laws criminalizing beliefs (as distinguished from actions based on beliefs) and people should not be denied housing, jobs, etc., because of their beliefs, but let's never lose sight of the fact that belief is a powerful motivating force, and historically it has motivated people to commit the most heinous crimes against humanity.

AK

Albuquerque, New Mexico

10 February 2006

On "US right responds to anti-Muslim cartoon controversy: New York Times columnist David Brooks proposes the 'good crusade'"

Thank you for your insightful comments on the religious irrationalism so apparent in the United States today. A recent interest in the Spanish Civil War has been illuminating insofar as pointing out the degree to which the Spanish Catholic Church was instrumental in the fascist reaction to the republic. In some ways, conditions in the US remind me of that period. Even American liberals of the present time bear striking parallels to those of 1930s Spain: incapable of articulating a meaningful response to the rise of the right, and often wittingly or unwittingly playing into the hands of the right.

On a personal note: I was briefly married to a Christian fundamentalist here, in San Antonio, and in a misguided attempt to accommodate my ex-spouse, attended several of John Hagee's services at Cornerstone Church. I was most struck by the rapt, almost hypnotic reaction of the congregation to Hagee's rantings. The whole thing put me instantly in mind of films I had seen of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies. Americans discount these people at their peril. Keep up your valuable and essential work.

JF

San Antonio, Texas

11 February 2006

Excellent article. I thought what was missing from previous articles on the issue was the absence of a statement on the right of Free Speech. It's a two-pronged provocation as it invites censorship as a remedy. And the hail of stones in reply to provocations is of course also a form of speech, to be applied quite liberally.

RBV

11 February 2006

With Brooks, I don't see "self-admiration." On the contrary, I see fear and self-loathing, as he quickly and desperately tries to think before he writes, after apparently forgoing that duty for too long. The fact is, that much of Socrates, whom he cites, was partly a metaphysical thinker (believed in a soul, etc.), and so, despite Brooks's claim, was "mythological" to an extent, and obviously, by even a child's view of the timeline, was "pre-Enlightenment," (although Brooks implies the contrary) having written over 2000 years ago.

Another point is this: The cartoons were first published in Denmark and Europe, not in Iraq or Afghanistan. Europe has been in the midst of much labor and social strife recently. France, Belgium, Germany, and other countries have seen massive strikes and pressures, etc. May I suggest that the reason for the use of the cartoons in Europe, in addition to firing people up for a foreign religious crusade, was also to attempt to further split the working class of Europe along religious lines in order to frustrate the growing labor and social movements that challenge the European governments' reactionary social and labor programs? Not only do the cartoons reflect on foreign policy designs, they also reflect the goals of recent domestic and continental bourgeois policy, which is stepping back to the old "divide and rule" formula.

JB

11 February 2006

Your article on *New York Times* columnist David Brooks made the accusation that “the most zealous member of the Muslim Brotherhood has nothing on the apocalyptic wing of the Republican Party.” Tell me, when was the last time a Christian fundamentalist blew up a street corner filled with women and children? When was the last time one of these extremists hijacked an airplane and flew it into a skyscraper, murdering thousands? When was the last time sects of Christian fundamentalism went to war with one another, as Muslim Shiites and Sunnis are doing every day in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan? Christianity may have its loons, but at least they don’t act upon their beliefs of Christian hegemony with violence, as do Muslim extremists.

MD

11 February 2006

I have been reading the WSWS for quite a while and find its analysis the best anywhere. I find it an invaluable source for articulating things that I feel but sometimes can’t quite find the precise words. This piece by David Walsh not only nails the smug David Brooks for what he is, but as always identifies and illuminates the issues’ larger context. Kudos to David Walsh and the entire WSWS staff. Keep on telling the truth!

AA

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

11 February 2006

With Allah’s name, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

Dear David Walsh: Peace be upon you.

I agree with your comments on David Brooks’s article. The article brings out the utter ignorance of the Muslim contribution to modern sciences, including medicine. When there were 100 hospitals in one Muslim city of Qurtubah (Cordoba, Spain), there were none in the entire Europe. Europe took 300 years to make the first hospital in Paris. Muslims founded all modern sciences and removed the world from the mythology of Greece and the era of gods and goddesses. It was Muslims who taught the correct cardiopulmonary circulation and gave the principles which centuries later were dishonestly named after Europeans. Muslims’ progress, openness, lack of biases, etc., produced sunshine in Europe and introduced renaissance and industrial revolution. Muslims were able to do this only due to the teachings of Quran, which enormously widens the horizons and removes dust and rust from the hearts, thus producing clear vision.

David Brooks’s articles prove that newspapers like the *New York Times* can have such ignorant people as writers, thus making the *New York Times* a spreader of Jahilia (ignorance) rather than enlightening the world with truth.

With most cordial regards,

AUH

Islamabad, Pakistan

12 February 2006

Thank you for so eloquently exposing the material conditions behind the fraudulent call to arms to defend free speech. Bourgeois media is happy to publish this freedom of speech nonsense, but tells its readers nothing about the miserable conditions of life forced upon subjugated peoples of the Middle East. My nephew has just returned from a trip which included a visit to Ramallah and other areas of the West Bank. In traveling through these areas he was subjected to long delays whilst the Israeli military closed various border crossings and checkpoints. The military personnel openly admitted that there was no other reason for these closures other than harassment. They even explained to him that the timing of the closures was arbitrary to increase their effectiveness. Only Jewish people are allowed to use the access roads to Israeli settlements and Palestinians can be forced to travel many kilometers around these settlements for a journey of a few hundred meters. His partner described how she was waved through a checkpoint relatively quickly when her identity was

established, but she saw a Palestinian women who was spoken to as if she were a dog and forced to take her shoes off and walk through mud to continue. Are we really going to explain to these people that: “We believe in progress and in personal growth.... Our mind-set is progressive and rational. Your mind-set is pre-Enlightenment and mythological”?

TH

Shoalwater, Australia

12 February 2006

As always, David Walsh hits it right on the head. I wonder if David Brooks knows that it was the Arabs that saved the works of Plato and Aristotle, Euclid and the pre-Sophists, created algebra and gave the basis for calculus, founded the world’s first universities and were making scientific discoveries long before the so-called civilised West stumbled out of the Dark Ages? Without the Arabs, there wouldn’t be a Western civilisation, one that is now being grounded into dust by the very people claiming to uphold it! If anyone is being backwards, it’s the like of David Brooks. The robber barons, theocratic barbarians, sycophantic corporate media, and war criminals in charge destroy any and all remaining shreds of what we have once called democracy. Keep up the good work.

CC

Glasgow, Scotland

12 February 2006

Another excellent article by David Walsh regarding the right-wing trajectory of the *New York Times* and their mouth-organ, columnist David Brooks. I work with some fundamentalist Christian types who would think David Brooks is the next best thing to white bread. They tend to read the Bible but seldom pick up a newspaper, so I doubt they know or read him. I intend to post a copy of your article on the staff bathroom corkboard as a refutation to the very propaganda regurgitated by Brooks and them. Maybe they will gain some insight? I won’t hold my breath, but maybe other staff at work who listen to their religious/political mythologies will.

JP

Westville, Illinois

13 February 2006

Can anyone imagine a newspaper printing degrading cartoons about a particular race? Would any endorse printing Polish jokes? I think not. Refusing to print racial/religious slurs is not damning freedom of the press, but endorsing the values of maturity and civility and the raising of collective consciousness of humankind. Fascists seek to manipulate emotions in the basest of ways, by appealing to the darker emotions of people, under the guise of “freedom” of some sort. Have we not learned anything from the holocaust?

Two right-wing newspapers in Alberta, Canada now are going to publish the provocative cartoons under the pretense of freedom of the press, free speech, etc. Considering the political bent of this province, of the new prime minister of this country who hails from this province, all does not bode well for Canada, nationally or internationally. The forces behind Denmark’s paper are exactly the same as those behind Alberta’s and a multitude of others across this globe.

When the elite can no longer see the consequences of their actions, civilization crumbles. We are seeing this today. And what of tomorrow? Another holocaust?

SN

Canada

13 February 2006



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