

# **Islam and the Media: Tracing the Debate**

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# Islam and the Media: Tracing the Debate

## Background

In the world that we lived in today, the discussion about Islam and the West and the nature of its relationship is always difficult and complex. However, it is worth noting that after 9/11 the inter-cultural dialogue and understanding between Islam and the West has become increasingly important. The publication of *Fitna* in 2008 and the controversy that followed it is reminiscent of several other events discussed in this paper. They will provide a historical background to understand the nature of relationship between Islam and the West in the last twenty years. These events include the Danish Cartoon controversy in 2005/2006, the Van Gogh assassination in 2002, and the Rushdie Affair that took place two decades ago.

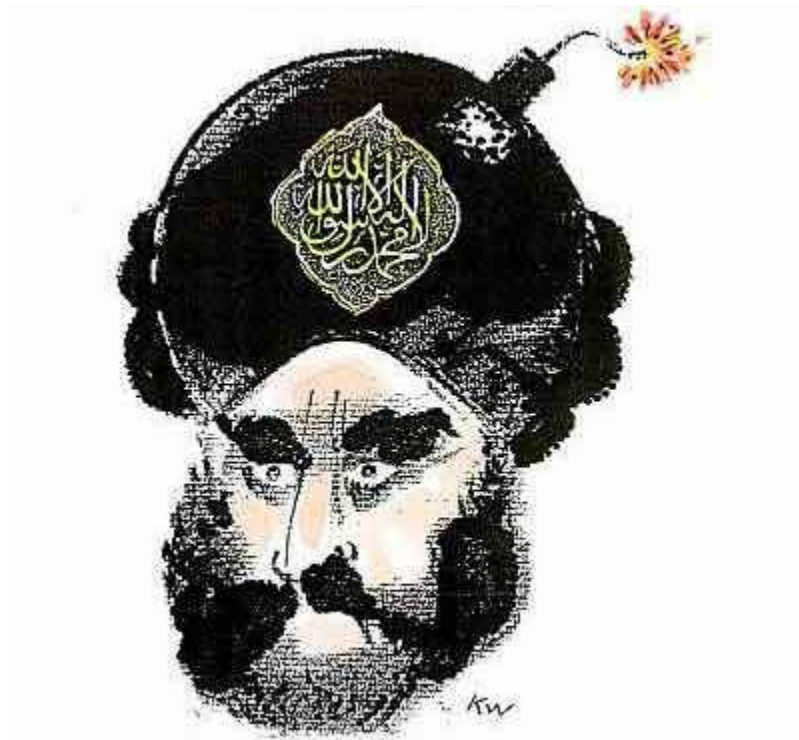
## Jyllands-Posten Cartoon Controversy

The *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy began when *Jyllands-Posten*, an established Danish newspaper, on September 30, 2005 published a dozen cartoons (see **Appendix**) depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The *Jyllands-Posten* itself has very high circulation (Olesen, 2007) and claimed to be a newspaper that is ‘independent of political, financial, organisational, religious, and commercial interests’ (Eko and Berkowitz, 2007). Despite the immediate responses from Danish Muslims, the first publication failed to garner international attention.

Danish *Imams*, however, brought the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons to the international level in order to underline the notion that any publication of this nature not only offended Danish Muslims, but all Muslims around the globe. They circulated the ‘Akkari-Laban Dossier,’ document named after its principal authors, Ahmad Abu Laban and Ahmed Akkari, which contains several letters from various Muslims organisations explaining the case. It also included clippings from *Jyllands-Posten* and some other images that Danish Muslims find insulting. Asser (2006) concludes that the distribution of the dossier was

also intended to illustrate the atmosphere of ‘Islamophobia’ in which the Danish Muslims say they must contend with. As a result, during the period of January-February 2006, international attention was directed to Denmark.

The twelve cartoons published by *Jyllands-Posten* were actually intended to bring the problem of self-censorship in Danish media to the fore. The issue surfaced after a Danish writer, Kare Bluitgen, complained that he could not find an illustrator who was willing to work with him in his quest to produce a children’s book on the Prophet Muhammad. Most illustrators did not want to undermine the Islamic doctrine that prohibits the portrayal of the Prophet (Asser, 2006; Berkowitz and Eko, 2007; Saunders, 2008). As a response to Bluitgen’s problem, the editor at *Jyllands-Posten* invited Danish artists to contribute illustrations on the Prophet ‘as the artists see him’ (Eko and Berkowitz, 2007, pp. 2-3). The invitation was also intended to investigate the extent of self-censorship over Islamic issues in Denmark. Hence the publication was meant to promote free speech and to reject the pressure from Muslim groups to respect their sensitivities. Twelve illustrators then submitted their work and *Jyllands-Posten* published the twelve cartoons with ‘Muhammad’s Ansigt’ (The Face of Muhammad) as the title.



**Figure 1. The Bomb in The Turban**

According to Asser (2006), the most controversial image is the one which depicted the Prophet wearing a bomb-shaped turban (see **Figure 1**). This depiction, he asserts, fits with the conception of the stereotypical villain. The cartoons immediately sparked negative responses not only from Danish Muslims, but from Muslims around the globe.

Bhattacharya (2007) and Hussain (2007) argue that Muslims are offended because they perceive any attempt to personify the Prophet is inconsiderate and insulting. Muslims also recognised that most of the cartoons projected an image of Islam in a stereotypical fashion, suggesting it to be a religion of violence. However, as Olesen (2007, pp. 301-302) points out, during the controversy *Jyllands-Posten* decided not to continue its passive approach and adopted a more proactive attitude. Accordingly, on January 30, 2006 *Jyllands-Posten* issued an apology on its website both in English and Arabic.

The republication of the cartoons in several countries including Egypt, France, the Netherlands, and Germany triggered massive protests around the globe. In France, for example, many newspapers republished the cartoons while adding their own to demonstrate their support for freedom of expression (Eko and Berkowitz, 2007). Shortly after the cartoons made international headlines, three Danish embassies were attacked (McLaughlin and Sulugiuc, 2008), Danish flags were burned, and many died in riots that followed (BBC News, 2008; Bhattacharya, 2007). The cartoons controversy did not only affect the Danish social order. The controversy has also cost Danish companies almost US\$ 200 million because of the economic sanctions imposed by several Muslim countries. It was described by the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, as the country's worst international crisis since World War II (Saunders, 2008).

Earlier this year, following the arrest of three people who were alleged to have planned an assassination attempt on Kurt Westergaard – the creator of Bomb in the Turban illustration – several Danish media reprinted the twelve cartoons to represent their

support and commitment to freedom of speech (McLaughlin and Sulugiuc, 2008; BBC News, 2008). This decision further complicated the matter. Consequently, the controversy has brought to the fore the extensive discussion on the parameters of freedom of expression (Bennoune, 2006, p. 407).

With reference to 9/11, the media, according to Olesen (2007, p. 303), has politicised religion with Islam at its core. The attack also created a platform for ‘claim makers’ both Muslims and non-Muslims with new opportunities ‘for framing and legitimising claims.’ After the 9/11, the media, politicians, and many corporations were eager to put Islam and Muslims on the centre stage for two distinct reasons. As Olesen explains, one of the reasons is the growing understanding that cross-cultural dialogue is increasingly important. The second is the willingness to make a clear distinction between Western and Muslim conceptions of society and democracy. Thus, the public were deeply divided. Free speech and inter-cultural understanding are now seen to be bipolar.

Saunders (2008) observes that the BBC, FOX News, and CNN reported the controversy within the frame of ‘Muslim rage’ and portrayed moderate Muslims as the silent majority. The Australian media, as Aly (2007) notes, used the controversy to reinforce the stereotype of bad Muslims and emphasised Muslims’ attempt to reject the values of Western secular societies. Interestingly, the *Wall Street Journal* (2006) perceived the maelstrom as a clash *within* a civilisation whereby the ‘barbaric’ and the ‘civilized’ Muslims are the ones in conflict with one another.

Despite the ‘instinctive rush’ to defend free speech in the West and to defend Muslims’ sacrosanct view of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussain (2007, p. 125) concludes that, in fact, both groups reacted without realising that their acts were unconsciously driven by their incomprehension of the essence of the problem. Although mainstream media mostly painted a grim picture on the controversy, the *Guardians* (as cited in Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 20), nonetheless, proposes an alternative approach,

[i]t has been claimed that freedom of speech is absolute ad beyond qualification. Indeed the reproduction of the Danish cartoons across a number of European countries was claimed to be in support of such an unqualified right. But how much do we really exercise or tolerance such notion? Religion no more restricts freedom of speech than

secularism promotes it. [...] The cartoons had more to do with incitement of hatred, racism and Islamophobia than with freedom of expression.

## **The Assassination of Theo van Gogh**

The relationship between Islam and the West was also placed under stress a year prior to the *Jyllands-Posten's* publication of the cartoons. It was started by the assassination of a Dutch film maker, Theo van Gogh. He was killed on November 2, 2004 by a 26 year-old Moroccan and Muslim fundamentalist, Mohammed Bouyeri (Buruma, 2006; Doppen, 2007).

Theo van Gogh was born in Den Haag in 1957 and released his first film in 1982 despite his lack of formal education in film making. Within two decades, he produced 25 films, including the film that cost him his life, *Submission*. Van Gogh was famous in the Netherlands although it is important to note that his fame was only partly related to his films. He was a familiar figure in Dutch media, with commitments ranging from television, radio, newspaper, and internet columns. His notoriety stemmed from his provocative statements about 'everything from the alleged exploitation of the Holocaust by the Jewish celebrities to the dangerous presence of a Muslim 'fifth column' operating in Dutch society' (Buruma, 2006, p. 2).

His most controversial film, *Submission*, angered the Dutch Muslim community. It is an eleven minute film based on a narrative by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Dutch parliament member who grew up in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Ethiopia. She is widely known for her controversial statements against any kind of religion (Prins and Saharso, 2008, p. 368). Before van Gogh was assassinated, Ali was the most prominent critic of Islam in the Netherlands that propagates the Qur'an as a source of violent abuse.

The controversial film dramatises Ali's view of the abuse of women in Islamic society by projecting quotations from the Qur'an onto the naked bodies of young women. The quotations are in reference to women's submission to their fathers, brothers, husbands,

and God. It reinforces the notion that Muslim women are passive victims (Jusova, 2008, p. 151). Throughout the film, the four short monologues were delivered in English, a clear indication that *Submission* is intended for an international audience. Through this approach, Ali asserts that Islam in fact legitimises sexual violence against women (Prins and Saharso, 2008, p. 368).

The film did not receive much attention until it was aired on a Dutch television. In the program, Ali, filling her role as a well known public figure, was asked to select her favourite scene from her favourite film or TV program. She chose to nominate her own work, *Submission*. It caused public outcry shortly after. For many Muslims, this was a deliberate provocation. The film, Jusova (2008, p. 148) suggests, divided the country. It was praised by some as a brave attempt to voice the struggles experienced by disadvantaged Muslim women. Others believe that *Submission* is divisive and has unfairly painted Islam as the root of the domestic problems within Muslim families. According to Doppen (2007, p. 108), the debate then fanned the dispute on the future of the Netherlands and brought to the fore issues such as citizenship and tolerance.

The disagreements among the Dutch escalated when several mosques and Muslim schools were burned down. Three churches were also attacked. The country, according to one television announcer (as cited in Buruma, 2006, p. 7), was burning. However, as Buruma argues, 'the country was not burning at all.' The arsonists that set fire to a Muslim school in Uden, were nothing more than bored teenagers. Those interested or upset by the film were in fact capable of restraining themselves. It was the media and the politicians, suggest Buruma (2006) and Celermajer (2007), who created the negative atmosphere by purposely circulating inflammatory comments.

The assassination of Theo van Gogh, has forced Ayan Hirsi Ali into hiding. However, after a major problem with her citizenship status, on May 2006 Ali moved to the U.S. and joined the American Enterprise Institute. Nevertheless, her short political career in the Netherlands has left the Dutch to continue re-examining their definition of citizenship

and immigration policy as well as to questioning their definition on tolerance and freedom of speech and expression.

## **The Rushdie Affair**

The Rushdie Affair is one of the most controversial cases of the late twentieth century. The presupposed incompatibility between Islam and the West received global attention through the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie's fourth book. It created a wave of unforeseen reactions for both the novel and its author (Kuortti, 2007, p. 125).

*The Satanic Verses* was first published in the UK and Canada on 26 September, 1988 (Hussain, 2002, p. 3). The storyline revolves around the two main characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. Gibreel Farishta was born as Ismail Najbuddin and works in the Bollywood film industry as an actor. Najbuddin uses Gibreel Farishta as his stage name, which in Urdu means Archangel Gabriel. Farishta is a schizophrenic and his other personality embraces and personifies the name. He imagined he is the Archangel Gabriel himself and dreams the revelation to the Prophet.

Saladin Chamcha, another prominent character, is also an actor. His journey in life at one point has transformed him into the Devil; the nemesis of Farishta. Chamcha's real name is Salahuddin Chamchawala but he decides to shorten his name in order to assimilate in England. Both Chamcha and Farishta migrated to England to pursue a better life.

The issue of migration is the main theme running deep within *The Satanic Verses* (Kuortti, 2007, p. 128). However, the most problematic issue is the religious theme in which the names of the characters share some connections with Islamic tradition. Muslims are offended because Rushdie made little effort to veil his slight reference to the Prophet's wives as prostitutes (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 4). However, Muslims are mostly hurt by the association implied by Rushdie that the Qur'an is the work of Satan (Ranasinha, 2007, p. 45). Through Farishta's dreams, readers learn that the Qur'an is subject to the Prophet's interpretation and not the true word of God. This depiction raises



questions about the authenticity of the Qur'an which in turn forces readers to question the very foundation of Islam. Thus, Muslims interpret *The Satanic Verses* as a betrayal of faith. Muslims are insulted because of the great number of Islamic themes and references used in *The Satanic Verses* (Hussain, 2002, p. 3) and 'Rushdie's apparent questioning the core of Islamic beliefs' (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 4).

According to Ranasinha (2007, p. 46) British Muslims are the most offended because of the damage inflicted upon the positive image of Rushdie prior to *The Satanic Verses*. Previously, many British Muslims identified themselves with Rushdie and considered him to be their intellectual representative. However, after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, they immediately voiced their protest to detach themselves from any form of association. They demanded the publishers withdraw *The Satanic Verses* from the market and urged book stores to remove the books from their shelves.

Days after the first release, on October 5, 1988, India decided to ban the circulation of *The Satanic Verses* throughout the country. It was the first country to do so. Before long, *The Satanic Verses* had been banned in 45 countries (Ranasinha, 2007, p. 47). The rationalisation of such decision is that *The Satanic Verses* poses a threat to violate the domestic religious harmony. It is worth noting that Syed Shahabuddin, one of the Indian parliament members who asked for the ban, did not read the book. Many people then followed his example; advocating for a ban without reading the book. Interestingly, the act of banning, in this case banning the *Satanic Verses*, it actually guarantees popularity and readership.

As a form of protest, a Muslim community in Bolton, England, burned the book on December 2, 1988. It was the first book burning action but did not make British national headlines. The protestors then made some adjustment by notifying the national media prior the book burning. Hence the book burning in Bradford on January 14, 1989 received not only national attention, but also international attention. As a result, many book stores in the UK withdrew *The Satanic Verses* from their shelves.

The Rushdie Affair led to a division among many Muslim intellectuals (Ranasinha, 2007, p. 46). According to Kuortti (2007, p. 125), most Muslims perceived the book as blasphemous toward Islam. Rushdie was accused of propagating Western conceptions of Orientalism and prejudice that promoted the ‘othering’ of Muslims in general. On the other hand, some defended Rushdie’s work on the grounds of free speech and perceived it to be Rushdie’s attempt to demystify the concept by using it in hope to reverse its meaning.

The massive attention and contradictory reception, according to Ranasinha (2007, p. 47), started to be seen as ‘a metaphor for the clash of civilisation.’ Islam, Richardson (2001, p. 153) posits, is characterised by the media as a religion with ‘irrational beliefs and practices,’ thereby creating the perception that the Muslim assertion of prejudice against them is baseless. He points out that mainstream media in the UK referring to *The Satanic Verses* as a form of criticism and satire denotes Muslims’ over-sensitivity and suggests that Muslims simply ‘didn’t get the joke’.

The Rushdie Affair gained more attention after Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian leader, issued a *fatwa*, a legal statement condemning Rushdie to death because of his deliberate writing that opposed Islam:

I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* – which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur’an – and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its contents, are sentenced to death (as cited in Kuortti, 2007, p. 125).

He declared that to kill Rushdie is an Islamic duty, ‘sweetened by offers of a place in paradise if the assassin were to die in the attempt, or a reward of millions in this world if martyrdom should be denied’ (Garvey, 1989, p. 166). Rushdie was then forced into hiding and sought political refuge in Britain (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 5).

The *fatwa*, nonetheless, evoked divisive responses from many Muslim leaders. They expressed disagreement with Khomeini’s *fatwa* that encouraged Muslims to kill Rushdie without making reference to any judicial process (Kamali as cited in Hussain, 2002, p. 17). However, there are Muslims who took Khomeini’s *fatwa* literally. Consequently,

translators of *The Satanic Verses* were stabbed and seriously injured in Norway and one of the translators was murdered in Japan. Another was managed to escape when his hotel was set on fire. The tragic fact, however, 37 people were died in the blaze (Pipes, 1999, pp. 41-42). Violent reactions from Muslims around the world are interpreted by the British media as a serious threat to a British democratic ideal: the freedom of expression (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 14).

Garvey (1989) asserts that despite the fact that the *fatwa* is evil and that the act of censorship is dangerous to any society, the most important thing to do is to look beyond the obvious. He listed at least three things that we need to pay attention to in perceiving the Rushdie Affair. First, he points out that although Muslim leaders do not hold unanimous agreement with Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa*, they do share a common grievance with the fact that the West has consistently refused to try to understand Islam. Hence, he stresses the need to understand Islam more critically. Second, he suggests that responses to Muslims' anger toward the publication of *The Satanic Verses* was inappropriate by referring to the public reading of Rushdie's most offensive passages to defended Rushdie and to disavow Khomeini's death threat. As he further argues, the mocking of, say, the Holocaust or the death of Martin Luther King would not be acceptable, and such an action would naturally cause outrage in Western countries. Garvey also proposes that the controversy is just the beginning of something deeper and more significant: a widening alienation between the Islamic world and the secular West which itself has a growing Muslim population

Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses* according to Ranasinha (2007, p. 48) provoked debates about multiculturalism, social integration, and citizenship that has resulted from the increasing mobility of the age of globalisation. Such mobility, as Kalliney (2002) argues, also includes tangible elements, namely, the flow of capital and labour. The concept of mobility that is employed by Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* also embraces the political, historical, cultural, religious, linguistic, and social spheres of our society. *The Satanic Verses* thus stages the appeal of globalisation in the contemporary social, economic, cultural, and political conditions.

## **The Underlying Thread**

From the three cases presented in this paper, there are some similarities that are too obvious to ignore. Despite the large Muslim diasporas throughout the world, and the fact that we are now living in an age of globalisation characterised by an increasing flow of capital and labour across borders, Bhattacharya (2007) argues that Islam and Western cultures still have unresolved issues. These problems are magnified by unfavourable media coverage. Of all three cases, mainstream media focuses on the volatile and irrational reactions of Muslim communities. Muslims are most likely to be defined by mainstream media within Orientalist terms, that they are primitive, violent, and anti-Western.

Globalisation has created ‘cultures in between’ because migrants neither belong to their home country nor to their host. Muslims and the West are experiencing difficulties in fostering assimilation. The most prominent issue is the social alienation that puts Muslim migrants as the ‘outsiders’ and the ‘others’. This is a common problem shared by the three cases presented in this paper. Muslim migrants are perceived as incapable of integrating with the adopted nation’s values and cultures. Thus, Muslim migrants fail to comprehend the importance of freedom of speech, an important requirement in any democratic society. This notion then leads to the general tendency for mainstream media to paint the relationship of Islam and the West as the clashing of two individual rights: religious freedom on one hand versus freedom of speech and expression on the other.

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## Appendix

### *The Jyllands-Posten Cartoon published on September 30, 2005*

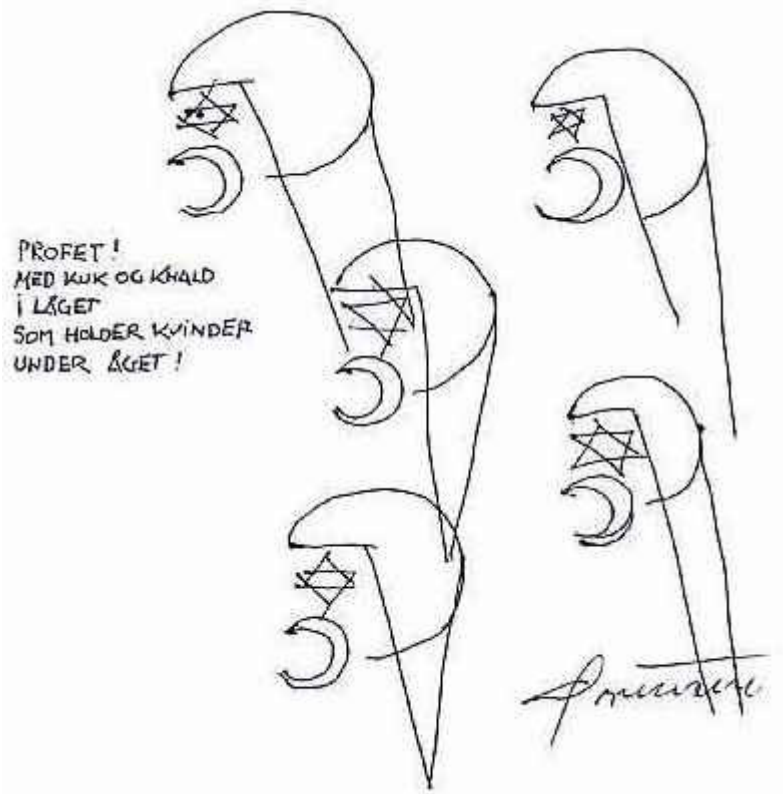


On the blackboard it says in Persian with Arabic letters that 'Jyllands-Posten's journalists are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs'

**Danish Cartoon 1**



**Danish Cartoon 2**



Danish Cartoon 3



Danish Cartoon 4





Danish Cartoon 5



Danish Cartoon 6



Danish Cartoon 7



• ROLIG, VENNER, NÅR ALT KOMMER TIL ALT ER DET JO BARE EN  
TEGNING LAVET AF EN VANTRO SØNDERJYDE...  
Relax folks it is just a sketch made by a Dane  
from the south-west Denmark.

Danish Cartoon 8



**Danish Cartoon 9**



**Danish Cartoon 10**



Danish Cartoon 11

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